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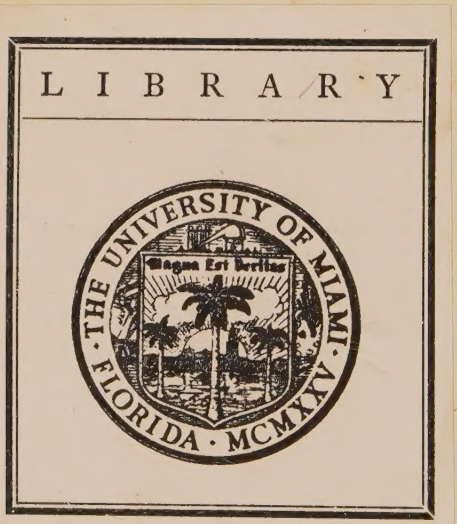

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The Muse in Council

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The Muse in Council
by John Drinkwater

Sidgwick and Jackson
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TO
FERRIS GREENSLET

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The Poet and Communication[1]

The immediate trouble about all æsthetic theories is that when they are first propounded nobody understands them. By far the most interesting critics of poetry have always been the poets themselves, although it may be said, in passing, that some poets are quite extraordinarily bad critics. But it is strange to find how often a poet, who is at his own creative work all lucidity, can become in his theory full of difficulty. It is beside the point to say that anybody interested in poetry can understand clearly enough the creeds professed by Dryden and Wordsworth and Shelley and Matthew Arnold. Certainly we can understand these to-day, but then we have been learning how to do so for anything from two hundred down to sixty years; we are apt to forget that when we read a book two hundred years old we are profiting in our understanding of it by all the understanding that has been brought to it by the generations before us. It is when we come to the critical theory of our contemporaries that the difficulty is manifest. There have lately been published an unusually large number of books dealing with poetic theory. Some of these have been merely superficial journalism, written without any

[1] Conway Memorial Lecture, 1923.

wide knowledge of English poetry or its history, and showing no natural gifts of judgment. But there have been others which are real contributions to the subject, and are likely in time to take a place with the considerable poetry itself of this age. But I cannot believe that any honest reader can pretend that these books are easy to understand. I have lately read, for example, Mr Lascelles Abercrombie's essay *Towards a Theory of Art*, Mr Robert Graves's *On English Poetry*, and Dr Strachan's *The Soul of Modern Poetry*. All three are responsible, well-informed and acute work. It is doubtful whether the metaphysical nature of poetry has ever been so subtly stated before in English as it is by Mr Abercrombie ; a patient reading of the work will, I think, convince any competent reader that this is not an extravagant claim. Mr Graves's essay is a much more mercurial affair, just, as it were, the personal notes made by a poet in-between-whiles upon the processes of his own art. It is more often than not unconvincing, but it was not written to convince, and it remains a very charming record full of independence and personality. Just as Mr Abercrombie's work is important as a contribution towards the metaphysics of poetry, so Dr Strachan's book has real originality as a study of the moral philosophy

of poetry. And yet though I know all these books to be admirable, there is a great deal in each of them that I cannot understand at all. Dr Strachan is relatively plain sailing, although even he often persuades us in his gentle way to take things on faith instead of showing any good reason why we should do so, but Mr Graves says things at times that seem to qualify for a place in Mr Lear's *Book of Nonsense*, where the joke always is not that something silly is being said, but that something is being said that isn't anything, while Mr Abercrombie, although he never comes within a thousand miles of saying anything that is nonsense, says a great many things that leave me painfully aware that I am but a very poor simpleton. But the fun of the whole thing is, if I may by way of illustration be personal for a moment, that I, who never say anything that is not as plain as the turnpike, am told by Mr Abercrombie that I have precisely the same effect upon him. Nobody I know will accuse me of presuming to place myself in Mr Abercrombie's company either as a poet or critic, but we are old friends and that is how we affect one another in these matters. The whole truth of the thing is that critical theory is nearly always less intelligible than the art with which it is dealing, because, while

the essential condition of art is that completeness of form which makes the thing created easy to perceive, critical theory is always incomplete, full of loose ends, and largely dependent upon the definition of terms about which no two people in the world are in agreement. In the course of time any particular poetic theory of great distinction is sanctioned by a common consent as to what it means. We may disagree with Wordsworth's view, for example, but we to-day do know what that view really was, or at least we all of us agree that we know this. But in Wordsworth's own time even informed opinion was not sure what he meant. It is not even vital that the interpretation which we make to-day of Wordsworth's theory may conceivably be one from which Wordsworth himself would dissent—a fact which we are apt to overlook. The important thing is that we have made out of his statement a very significant piece of poetic theory as to the nature of which, though not necessarily as to the importance of which, we are now of one mind. It may be suggested that the same thing happens about poetry itself, but I do not think this is so. It is perfectly true that any great poem, *Paradise Lost* let us say, has a more obvious significance to us now than it could have had to its readers when it was

published. That is to say, we approach it now with all the assurance bred of two hundred and fifty years of habit, and our minds, because of our ancestry, are able much more readily to perceive the full beauty of the poem. But this perception of beauty is a different thing from the understanding of a meaning, and while it is easier for the new reader of *Paradise Lost* to appreciate its grandeur as poetry than it was for the original reader, it is no easier for him to understand its meaning, and he has to apply himself with as much individual intelligence to that task as was necessary in the beginning. But with poetic theory the case is different, it might almost be said that it is reversed. An instructed reader coming across Matthew Arnold's *Preface* in 1853 must have known at once that here was somebody speaking with the voice of authority, but he might very well have been excused for not exactly understanding what the voice was saying. We to-day can only confirm the first impression as to the authority, but we can very much more clearly catch the purport and implications of what was being said. In short, it is the profounder quality in any work that most profits by the revealing processes of time. In *Paradise Lost* the doctrine is of less fundamental importance than the poetry, and it is the poetry

that has grown in dominion with the passing years; in the famous *Preface* the art was little and the doctrine much, and it is the doctrine which has gained in definition.

Much, therefore, that we may perhaps now find difficult in such a book as Mr Abercrombie's will no doubt be very easy going to readers two generations hence. But he raises one question with his conclusions about which I find myself in positive disagreement at once. It so happens that Dr Strachan, by an independent process, confirms Mr Abercrombie's opinion, and since the matter is one which must very profoundly affect any theory of art, and particularly from the artists' own point of view, I should at least like to try to state the other side of the question. My admiration for the two books in question I have already recorded, and anything I may have to say is said with a due sense of obligation. Mr Abercrombie, then, in his essay *Towards a Theory of Art*, writes:

> Several theorists having assumed, as they must, that art is expression, go on to point out that expression is not communication, and conclude from that that communication is a mere accident in art, as though the artist in his work were just talking to himself, and we happen along and overhear what he is saying. This is mere confusion. . . . What happens when an artist makes a work of art? He makes his

> experience communicable: and in order to make it exactly and perfectly so he will spend the whole force of his spirit. . . . If æsthetic experience is the condition of art's activity, the essence of its activity is communication.

This passage is, I am aware, in a very elaborate context, but I do not think that Mr Abercrombie would consider it unfair to set it apart. The argument seems to me to be fallacious in this respect, that while we may agree that art is expression, I cannot conceive of any clear thinker about the matter holding that expression is not communication. Mr Abercrombie says that there are such theorists, but I have not come across them; indeed he allows that even they are forced to admit that expression is communication, though by accident only. The whole point of the matter is to decide what is communication. Communication to whom? If it necessarily means communication from the artists to other people, then I do not at all believe that communication is in any important way the "essence of art's activity." If it may be put so, I believe that the real cause of art is the necessity in the artist for communication with himself. Mr Abercrombie goes on to instance a man looking at a landscape and finding it beautiful. He says that he is not thereby creating a work of art, but that in

perceiving the beauty he is expressing his experience "by the mere fact of [its] being distinctively and decisively known." He then adds:

> Now suppose this man is an artist. He desires, therefore, to achieve expression of experience. But if it is expression in the strictly limited sense, he has got it; he need do nothing more. Yet we know that he will show himself specifically to be an artist by the precise fact that he will do something more. He does not begin to be an artist until be begins to publish his experience. The expression he desires to achieve is external expression. You may say he is merely recording his experience. But for whose inspection? For his own? Certainly: but only for his own? Ask any artist, if you can charm him into a moment of candour. Or ask yourself, what are picture exhibitions for, what are publishing firms for, what are concerts for?

The answer to this seems to me to be that in merely looking at the landscape and finding it beautiful the man quite decidedly is not expressing his experience. He is not even expressing it silently to himself. He may enjoy it. He may even be content not to go beyond looking at it. But suppose him to be an artist, as Mr Abercrombie says, what does that mean? It means that in beholding this thing, a landscape or whatever it is, he feels the urgent necessity not only of looking at it but in as complete a way as possible of understanding it. That is really the fundamental hunger

of the human heart, to understand its own experience, and it is a hunger that can be satisfied in one way, and one way only, the taking of parts of that experience, as it were, isolating them from their irrelevant environment, and endowing them with the concrete form of art. It is precisely this that this man of whom we are speaking does, and it is in the actual doing of it that the experience becomes complete. It is only when he is forced to the extremely difficult business of achieving that concrete form of which I have spoken that he really perceives the object of his contemplation, that the experience, in fact, becomes complete. We can illustrate this fact by almost any well-known passage from poetry. We can imagine Shakespeare walking along a Stratford lane in winter, looking at the leafless trees, and thinking of the summer that had gone. But as he did this the experience both of the thing seen and the thing suggested, of the visible object and of the idea, was vague, enveloped in a mist of a thousand other thoughts that had no relation in particular to these things, inducing, no doubt, a wistfully pleasant mood, but not the exaltation of clean-cut imaginative fulfilment. It was only afterwards, when the moment returned to him, and insisted upon itself, and forced him to

deal with it with more than the half indolence in which it had first passed, that he braced himself to the effort of putting down in set words "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," and the experience became complete. I do not believe that when he was creating that line Shakespeare either consciously or sub-consciously had any desire to communicate his experience to somebody else. I believe that his only purpose was to satisfy the demand of his own mind for the understanding of its experience, or, to keep more closely to our line of argument, to make an imperfect experience perfect. When Dr Strachan says:

> All art means that we have something to communicate. No poet dare claim that he is independent of his audience; otherwise his action in writing, printing, publishing is a sheer contradiction,

he, as it seems to me, overlooks this essential condition of creative process, just as Mr Abercrombie does. Of the concerts and publishers, of which both of them speak, I shall have something to say in a moment. In the meantime, at the risk of repetition, I want to make my point a little more exhaustively if I can.

As to why there should be this hunger in the human mind, and as to the end to which it is leading

us, I do not know that anybody can offer any sort of explanation. All we know is that the desire for completeness in experience, for mastering our own experience instead of being mastered by it, is one that dominates our lives. Complete understanding of our experience is the most satisfying condition to which we can attain, just as total inability to make this welter of experience intelligible to ourselves results in madness. We get examples of this in all sorts of apparently quite trivial things in the daily affairs of life. We know how troubled the mind can become when, say, we are talking to a friend about something quite important, and we are moving logically step by step towards a clearly seen end in our argument, and we are suddenly held up by, perhaps, our failure to recollect the name of somebody who is not important to the matter under consideration and of whom our friend has never heard. A tiny fragment of our experience, in this case so insignificant a fragment as the knowledge of a friend's name, has suddenly gone out of control and at once becomes an irritant quality. We know with what an apparently disproportionate sense of relief we may an hour later suddenly recall the name and break in upon the conversation to announce the fact. This is a trifling instance, but, I think, sug-

gestive. The artist is the man who has this hunger for mastery over his experience, for understanding his own experience, more actively, perhaps, than is common. It is at once the glory and the tragedy of the artist's life. The glory because he more than others is given a way in which to satisfy his hunger. The tragedy because he more than others, again, is desperately aware of great volumes of experience that he can never completely understand. And I believe that in the bringing of this chaos of experience into something like a cosmos in his own mind the artist, strictly speaking, has no ulterior purpose whatever. When he is creating he is not thinking of what his audience is going to say about his work when it is done. If he is thinking about this his work will inevitably suffer, because so surely as an artist begins to think about what people are going to say of his finished work, or, indeed, is consciously aware that they are going to pass any judgment upon it at all, so surely will he, little by little, begin to put into his work something that he thinks people would like to have there, instead of setting down the truth solely for its own sake as he sees it in the light of his own vision. Every artist is beset by this danger, and none, I think, escapes from it quite unharmed ; but the law is plain.

While, however, we recognize that this is an essential condition of all worthy creation, that the act of creation is carried through first and foremost to bring completion of experience to the artist's own mind, and that if it were not for this purpose there would be no such thing as art, this is not the end of the matter. It must be understood that the argument implies that the poet, apart altogether from the consideration of an audience, would still actually write his poem upon paper, or at least shape it into exact form in set words in his mind, and not be content with a merely vague emotional perception that took on no concrete form. This same audience does, nevertheless, come into the scheme of art, and in two ways. First, from the point of view of the artist, the position seems to me to be this. Once he has done his work, as loyally as he can, abiding by that first essential condition of art, he has finished with his creative obligations, and becomes a member of society battling for his livelihood like the rest, and hungry, like the rest, for approval and acceptance. With a very human eagerness, therefore, he quite rightly begins to think of publishers, and concert rooms, and exhibitions, and he, quite legitimately, may take a keen interest, even a commercial interest, in the career of the work that he

has created. Just as I believe that no honest artist thinks about his audience when he is working, so do I believe that no artist who is also a rational being is indifferent to the public estimation of his work when it is finished. While communication to the world beyond does not seem to be a necessity to the poet in his work, publication of his work to other people becomes a very practical and human desire once it is completed. But, beyond this, communication or publication of his work to other people is of profound importance to the other people themselves, and it is a fortunate economy in the scheme of things that makes him want to hand his work on when it is done. For while the general view of what the use of art is to the world often seems to be wrong, there is no doubt that a world in which the artists created their work without publishing it would be the poorer by one of its most healing influences.

The nature of the influence would seem to be this. The hunger of each mind for the understanding of its own experience is one towards the satisfaction of which nothing is more helpful than communion with other minds that have in some measure solved this problem satisfactorily for themselves. And it is just such communion which is made every time

we come into vivid contact with a work of art. Before a work of art, we are in the presence of a mind that has in some measure mastered its own experience, and we come away from the presence with our own mind braced towards the understanding of its own experience in turn. That is the secret of the power of art in the world. It is not that the poets can solve our own problems and answer our own questions for us. My problems are my problems, they exist only in terms of my personality, and it is mere spiritual idleness for me to go to Shakespeare or Wordsworth or Browning, saying, " Here is my problem, what is the solution ; here is my question, what is the answer ? " They cannot tell me, nor can anyone but myself. But what I can do is to go to the great poets and under the influence of their faculty for achieving lucidity out of their darkness quicken my own powers of achieving lucidity for myself. This means that to value poetry for its message or the nature of its philosophic content is to misunderstand its very nature. If we truly care for poetry and know the virtue to be found in it, we shall profit equally from Wordsworth, who tells us that " Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting," and from Swinburne, who tells us that " life is a watch or a vision between a

sleep and a sleep," and Browning, who holds that "We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better, sleep to wake." Here we have three poets coming to three vastly different conclusions upon much the same speculation, but that does not matter. The point is that each in turn has been able to see his own philosophical experience so clearly that he has been able to reduce it to this excellent clarity of form, and it is that shaping faculty which stimulates our faculty to its own rich purpose in turn.

To hear people talk about art is generally to get but a very misleading impression as to what its real effect upon them is. This is, perhaps, most noticeably so in the case of the theatre, the most democratic of the arts. If we leave out of the question the great number of plays that make no abiding impression at all upon anybody and consider only those to which the spectator does return in his mind some days after he has seen them, we find that people even here rarely talk about the thing as intelligently as they feel it. A man will watch a fine play in the theatre, and respond to it with the fullness of emotion, and delight in the subtle intellectual structure and movement, and talk irrelevant nonsense about it at lunch the next day. He will almost certainly find himself arguing about the argument

of the play ; instead of recalling the manner in which the argument has been presented, praising that for its excellence and censuring where it fails. That is the true business of criticism, and one which critics, both amateur and professional, very commonly forget. For one person who can deal justly by the imperfections of a work of art, which is to do something of great spiritual significance, a hundred can chatter volubly about the artist's conclusions, which really do not matter to anybody but to the artist himself. If we rejoice in the presence of a vivid work of art, we should be able to carry that spirit of enjoyment with us into the world, braced by the strong imaginative life of which we have partaken, and it is no more than an impertinence for us to think it important to other people that they should know whether we do or do not happen to agree with the moral or psychological argument of that life. We have every right to complain if the life is not real, real, that is, in the sense that it was something about which the artist himself was convinced at creation, but we have no right to complain that it is a life of which we are not able personally to approve in our sympathies. Translated into terms of abstract life, we doubtless do not like Malvolio, but under the touch of Shakespeare's art we should be just as

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happy in his presence as in that of Viola, who is all grace. But the world is seldom good at reducing its emotion to reason, particularly when that reason has to come out at the end of a pen. I have known many critics enjoy a performance in a theatre, for example, quite simply in their emotions, who have yet reported nothing of that enjoyment when they have written of the event afterwards. In their actual experience most people are sound in their relation towards art, but in the defining of that experience they habitually come to grief. In reasoning about art they persist in applying standards not of imaginative virtue but of doctrine, and they blame the artist not for defective vision but for what he sees, so that still Pope is justified :

> A fool might once himself alone expose,
> Now one in verse makes many more in prose. . . .

Of the sufficiency for the artist of this communication to himself we are, perhaps, most tellingly persuaded when we are sometimes with forgotten and uncelebrated work. I was lately reading the love elegies of an obscure eighteenth-century poet, James Hammond, whom Samuel Johnson included in his *Lives* only to dismiss as negligible, and who has since come to no better luck than a contemptuous

reference in Mr I. A. Williams's recent *Byways Round Helicon*. Hammond, by his work as a whole, has deserved better treatment, having more art and feeling than Johnson allowed, and having a mood of tenderness not very common in his generation. It is true, however, that, for the most part, the fervour of his love escapes us in his verses, in which there is often an expectancy of the perfect word and no realization. Then, suddenly, in one poem we come across this stanza:

> With thee I hop'd to waste the pleasing Day,
> Till in thy Arms an Age of Joy was past,
> Then old with Love insensibly decay,
> And on thy Bosom gently Breath my last. . . .

With the exception of the one phrase, the stanza is no better than its fellows, but with his "old with Love" Hammond stumbles upon revelation, and for one moment is a poet with the best of them. There was some very vivid brightening of the emotion when he achieved that, and I do not believe that in the orderings of providence he captured the phrase chiefly so that he might communicate that brightening to some lucky reader two hundred years later. I think that providence wanted just once to be kind to the poet Hammond himself, and gave him that phrase in token of the goodwill. I do not suppose

that since he died Hammond has averaged one reader a year, but I do not think that to himself the significance of his moment was any the less for that.

The modern school of painting that refuses to represent anything that can be related to a natural image is inspired by this determination that its art shall be judged as art and not as doctrine. This does not mean at all that in the literary arts doctrine should have no place. The poet may bristle with convictions and be all the better poet for it, but it is not seemly in us to praise or dispraise him because of the nature of these. How does he present them, how does he stimulate us in the shaping of his vision, how does he quicken our faculties in the exercise of his ? These are the questions, and these alone, by which he comes up for our judgment. That he is human and treasures our good opinion of his work when it is done, even of the kind of man that his work embodies, is a circumstance of which it is dishonourable in us to take advantage. When his work is finished he may be hurt or gratified by opinions passed upon these false premises, but at the time of creation he knows better than this and would despise us for them. In the long run the only goodwill that he truly cherishes is that which comes from an audience which makes nothing of consent or other-

wise to his doctrine, but acknowledges in him that abundance of life which is alone the negation of evil. There is no deliberation in the lovely service which the poet does to mankind. It is his to

> . . . bless
> The world with benefits unknowingly ;
> As does the nightingale, upperched high,
> And cloister'd among cool and bunched leaves—
> She sings but to her love, nor e'er conceives
> How tiptoe Night holds back her dark-grey hood.[1]

[1] My friend, Ernest de Selincourt, has drawn my attention to the fitness of these lines from Keats to my argument.

The Poet and Tradition[1]

Every poet spends his life between the devil of imitation and the deep sea of revolt. So far as his deliberation controls his working at all—and it may be said that deliberation is an energy in the creative mind as vital as the more mercurial habit which we call inspiration, that it is, indeed, the patient conditioning of the moods from which inspiration springs—it is concerned more than anything else with the sorting of individual experience with tradition. Given creative energy, it is upon just dealing in this matter that all hope of its happy employment depends. For just as the idle surrender to tradition, the mere pilfering of another man's constructive achievement, is the most ignoble process of the mind, so the petulant refusal to consider tradition at all and the self-mistrust that forbids the artist to look at his fellow's wares lest he be tempted overmuch to steal, result always in fumbling pretentiousness. For an artist to suppose that the discovery and practice of his forerunners can be neglected without disaster is to be duped, and to be tradition's dupe is no more admirable than to be its slave. Let us, before considering the real problem of the poet's proper relation to tradition

[1] A Paper read to The Royal Society of Literature.

and the nourishment that he can draw from it, dismiss both slaves and dupes with a word or two. Of the slaves, indeed, hardly a word is necessary. The facile rhymesters who so copiously do ill what has already been done well are familiar to us all; their work is the token of half-witted appreciation of the work of others, and that is all there is to say. The dupes are not so easily measured. However far they may fall short of artistic salvation, they at least are not without artistic conscience. They do not understand; for they refuse the direction of an intelligence that is greater than theirs, the intelligence of generations, but their failure is one of undisciplined energy rather than of sloth. We are sometimes apt to be irritated by what seems to be the arrogance of these rather sorry tatterdemalions of art. Missing always the true significance of past achievement in their dread of its sorcery, they fall so often to abusing their fellows who, not fearing tradition, have mastered it. But it is, in truth, the abuse of unhappy minds, sick with half-realization of the health that they have missed. They remain inarticulate, and, unlike the slaves, not being withered in the roots, they know how desirable a thing articulation is. They are to be pitied, for there is no spiritual state so sorrowful as that of the man who,

knowing, not as a delighted observer but with creative intensity, the beauty of expression, cannot achieve it. These men, scorning tradition, lose their birthright, and they know it; well may they watch with eager censoriousness for the lapses of those who have made the wiser choice. The nature of their loss we shall see in examining the true function of tradition in the poet's work.

We may consider the question in two phases—not, perhaps, philosophically separable, but conveniently assumed as such for our purpose; the poet's relation to tradition in manner on the one hand and in substance on the other. The latter is by far the subtler problem of the two, but commonly, when the subject is discussed, it is rather with reference to a poet's use or abuse of traditional verse forms or his revolt from them. Rebellion against metrical fitness has, I suppose, in every generation achieved as much notoriety as any other kind of lawlessness. We hear of it frequently enough to-day, and in the absence of any kindred manifestations commonly reported from the past, there are not wanting prophets who would persuade us that it is a new thing, a revolt long delayed but breaking at last against a manner that has already been too patiently tolerated and must now once and for all

be discredited. The doctrine has a certain following, as every doctrine will always have that promises mastery without the pains of discipline. Destruction, it must be remembered, is a positive delight to many spirits to whom the joys of creation are sealed. Nothing is so comfortable to some minds as to contemplate the overthrow of beauty that jealously they do not understand, and to be assured that the measure is one of just reform, bringing an effete authority down from its pedestal, is to add a moral glow to an instinct immoral in essence. And so the gospel that the breaking of verse tradition is virtuous, and newly virtuous, is not altogether unprosperous. And yet we are sure that it has been advanced in every age with as much apparent credit, only its records have vanished as this later witness pathetically will vanish too. These arrogant but bewildered anarchs of earlier generations are nothing to-day but a stray note now and again in the second-hand book catalogues, while the order against which they railed stands in proud achievement and in example that remains to-day a living influence upon all work that has in it promise of durability. For it is a very notable thing that every poet who has achieved unquestionable distinction has worked in forms that, even at the time of his writing, had

a clearly recognizable parentage, while the rebels have achieved nothing. Whitman is the only possible exception, and his value is in spite of, and in no way because of, his manner. By rebels I mean the men who have, so to speak, been nonconformist to all the canons of poetic art that have been evolved, in England, through six centuries of practice, not the men who have explored and adapted those canons with every determination of creative energy ; I mean the men who are radically insensible to the distinction between English prose and English verse. Rebellion in the finer sense of the word is as admirable in art as in any other form of activity, but in art, as in the State, there is a world of difference between the rebellion which is a protest against the abuse of government, a determination to restore government to decency and its right sphere of service, and anarchy, which is a protest against any government at all. It is true that every poet of distinction has refused to submit the subtleties of his own rhythmic sense to mere external rule, but it is equally and very splendidly true that every poet who has achieved mastery has found it not only possible but entirely satisfactory to himself to find infinite scope for the play of every rhythmic nicety to which his imagination moves within the

confines of certain metrical structures that are the achievement of the cumulative poetic genius of his race. To take a simple and concrete example: it may be said that every poet, from Chaucer down to Rupert Brooke and his contemporaries, has done some of his best work in the five-foot iambic line that is the norm of English blank verse. A list of the poets of whom this is true would, I think, not exclude a single name of any importance. It is to be noted that the claim is not merely that every poet has used this form, but that every poet has achieved some of his best work in it. It is a simple fact which really disposes of the whole question of the fitness or otherwise of conformity to law in this matter. Here is a common verse unit which one poet after another for hundreds of years continues to find apt for his most personal and distinctive rhythmical needs. It would be absurd to suggest that his acceptance of it is mere laziness on his part; it can be due only to a profound and immutable rightness inherent in the form and approved with an ever-growing conviction by one generation of poets after another. And if the truth of this proposition be allowed, and I can see no escape from it, it is co-relatively true to say that the mood that acknowledges the fitness of a form that has, so to

speak, universal authority, is not only a wholesome mood, but that it is the only wholesome mood, that it is an essential condition of full creative power, and that failure to realize this will inevitably result in an incurable formlessness which is the very antithesis of poetry, for poetry is, supremely, form.

We may, therefore, generalize in addition to our claim for the blank-verse line by saying that no truly memorable work can be achieved in a form that does not clearly bear the mark of its descent. And experience justifies the generalization in the most emphatic and unanswerable way. It is impossible to point to any notable English poem of which the metrical form is not demonstrably the offspring of a form already known. And to the possible objection that, while this has been so for five or six centuries, at length it is to-day no longer so, I can only answer that even to this immediate moment I find all the most interesting verse that is being written cast in established moulds. The newest poets represent a great variety of mood and poetic intention. But they are without exception agreed, in common with their fellows who already begin to belong not to the latest generation, in the use of metrical forms that frankly acknowledge their descent. No; the poet who thinks to prove

his distinction by repudiating example instead of mastering it and using it with the freedom of mastery, proves nothing but his unfitness for the heritage, without which, in the light of strangely uniform experience, he cannot prosper. If a man cannot make, say, a five-foot iambic line his own, it means that he is not susceptible to the native properties of that line, and that means that he does not perceive a primary metrical characteristic of the language, and no amount of virtuosity in writing "free verse" or "prose poems" will redeem this cardinal defect in his equipment as a poet.

As a kind of intermediate step between metrical form and content matter we may consider diction. In the profounder sense diction is, perhaps, inseparable from content, since it is in the word that the intellectual perception is realized. But it is, I think, in this business of diction that the true poet is most likely to find himself in the toils with tradition. In his instinct about metrical form he may be relied on to keep, with but momentary lapses, a just balance between example and invention; he will find ample freedom in moving with his own modulations to measures which, in accepting them from the close deliberation of many ages, he truly discovers and recreates. Of his intellectual

perceptions we may be equally assured, since the process of preparing these for poetic shape is so deliberate and intense that he cannot mistake what is stolen for his own without failing altogether to be a poet, and it is of the poet that we are speaking. But in his choice of diction he has not, in anything like the same degree, the guidance of a conditional instinct on the one hand, or of obvious obligation on the other, and it is here that he has to use his most unrelaxing wariness. The cumulative practice of poetry from one age to another creates a great volume of verbal expression that, having certain fundamental properties of fitness and passing into the common stock, makes the most seductive appeals to every new writer as he comes along. Upon the tact and wisdom with which he responds to these appeals, his success as a poet largely depends. To listen without discretion is quickly to become altogether insensible to the living qualities of language; to reject them out of hand is the same kind of error as his who thinks he can discard metrical tradition. This volume of expression may conveniently be divided into four groups, which may be called (*a*) description through salient qualities, (*b*) figures of speech, (*c*) images, (*d*) poetic conventions. As an example of description through salient

quality let us take, very simply, *the blue sky*; as an example of a figure of speech, *he burns with rage*; of an image, *the wings of time*; of a poetic convention, the use of *thou* or *thee* or *thy* or *thine* in any connection, or, more elaborately, such a phrase as *methinks he hath a steed.* Of the first, second, and third of these exemplary phrases it is immediately clear that they are in themselves notably appropriate and significant. Nothing is more profoundly and durably characteristic of the sky than its blueness; fire being the most fiercely consuming of the elements, what more natural when a man experiences so consuming an emotion as rage than to say that he burns with it? And since of all swift things nothing is so daily and beautifully present to our senses as the wings of a bird, and since of time we are conscious of nothing more urgently than its swift passing, to speak of the wings of time is to achieve finely imaginative truth at a word. Further, not only are these phrases appropriate and significant —they touch experience which everyone who considers the matter concerned with any intentness is very likely, if not certain, to realize for himself. A man can hardly think about the sky at all without thinking about its blueness; "to burn with rage" is a figure that any poet might invent in the simplest

process of his imagination, as he might associate the swift passing of time with flight and wings. Thus the poet, although he finds such phrases as these ready to his pen, may conceivably use them when his creative mood is active and not lethargic, and yet, unless he uses them with the greatest tact and economy, lethargy of the imagination will certainly be imputed to him, and it is a charge that carries conviction with it, against appeal. We find suggested here, indeed, a curiously subtle test of a poet's quality. It would be safe to say at a venture that every man who has written any considerable volume of verse has used, for example, the juxtaposition of "blue" and "sky," and the decision as to whether we find in his use of the words personal vision or merely loose generalization, will be no negligible evidence as to the quality of his work as a whole. It is as fine a thing for the poet to call the sky blue because he is profoundly aware of its blueness, as it is weak of him to call it so because he has heard someone else doing so and he cannot think of anything else to say. And every reader of poetry knows how thrilling and newly charming such a phrase as "the blue sky" may be in the hands of a fine poet, how cloying when used by the lazy poetaster. Nevertheless, few, perhaps none, even

of the most vigilant poets are wholly blameless in this matter; if any is, it is certain that here his vigilance has been most closely exercised. Of the fourth group, poetic conventions in diction, it need only be observed that it is clearly ill-judged to perpetuate in verse a manner of speech that once drew its authority from the language of daily use but can no longer do so. It was once in certain communities natural to say "thou" and "thee" instead of "you," but it is so no longer, just as it is mere attitudinizing to-day to say "methinks he hath a steed" instead of "I think he has a horse," while once it was but to follow a common habit of speech. It is an error to suppose that the language of poetry should be the language of daily speech and no more; it is the poet's business to create for himself a speech that is a concentrated and quickened and enriched form of the speech that is habitual to the world in which he lives, but at the same time it is essential, if his language is to have living force, that it should not violate the idiom of common use by drifting into an outworn mode in the delusion that to be detached and remote is to be distinguished. To be detached in this kind is to perish in an airless world. The word of poetry is the fine flower of language, but the only soil from which it can spring

is the common speech of its time. When a great poet like William Morris seems in his practice to deny this condition, it is but that he does in a particular and strangely impressive way actually live through his imagination in an age that is only not his own by an accident of time. And I do not think that his example can be matched.

The final aspect of my subject is, perhaps, the most important, since it concerns the origin of the poet's work—the content matter of his poetry. We touch at once a question upon which, I think, there is more misunderstanding in the approach to poetry than upon any other. In a world where the acquisition of knowledge is momently extolled as being commercially profitable, and where spiritual timidity is so prevalent that not one man in a hundred dare advance one step in his thought without a guide, poetry, like any other manifestation of individual life, is continually being tested by its power to tell us something that will help us towards solving the many riddles that perplex us, as though we hoped that some day we might come upon a poet who should resolve the universe of our own spiritual experience into an exact and easy phrase. It is a test under which poetry inexorably refuses to reveal its secret. And yet this content matter,

this opinion, far from being of little moment to the poet himself, must absorb and compel his whole being, or his poetry can come to nothing. It is a strangely impressive operation of the nature of poetry (of all art, it might be said), that what the poet says is the source and condition of every virtue that his work may have, and is yet, if we are truly prepared for the high grace that poetry can bestow upon us, a thing in itself of no concern for us. For the value of the poet's work to us lies not in the nature of the thing that he sees, but in the intensity of his vision. Nearly all the nonsense that is talked about art springs from the preposterous and idle claim that the artist should confirm our own impressions or elucidate our difficulties. We have not begun to perceive the virtue of art until we know that the artist's sole duty towards us is so to quicken our own faculties by contact with his that they shall move with new power and assurance to the shaping of our own vision, to the ease of our own speculation. This being so, it follows that to demand of the poet that his meditation should chiefly touch the questions that are peculiarly of his own time, is to ask him to do work for us that we ought to do for ourselves, and to pay no respect to the nature of his art. When we say that a poet ought to be concerned

with contemporary life, we have no right to mean more than that he should so keep his faculties in touch with the men and women and phenomena of his daily experience as to bring the warm glow of reality into his work by the contact. We should mean, for example, that if he is singing to-day the beauty of Helen of Troy he should have thrilled to the beauty of some Helen of Liverpool or the Old Kent Road, or that if he recalls the coming of Persephone he should have gone delightedly himself through spring meadows. It may, indeed, be dangerous for him to use the machinery of an age not his own, since it is easier then for him to lapse from direct realization of his subject into the easy acceptance of another man's presentment. But his choice in this is his own affair, to justify or not as he can, and in experience we find the poets in all ages freely using not only the habit and event of an earlier day as the body that is to be informed with their own meditation upon life, but we frequently find them using this habit and event not merely as they stand in the unshaped condition of barely recorded facts, but as they have already been projected through another artist's mind. That they often improve upon their sources is but a happy accident of genius. Shakespeare borrowing extant

plays and romances and chronicles and working to their pattern often with the most literal fidelity, Keats brooding over *Paradise Lost* in preparation for *Hyperion*, Morris re-telling the Northern sagas and the stories of the classic and romantic worlds, Mr Yeats recreating the legends of heroic Ireland, Mr Hardy using the text-books of Napoleonic history for his great epic-drama as strictly as though he were about to take his final schools, Burns making songs out of songs already made, Mr Lascelles Abercrombie finding his new world in the Bible, and all of them achieving masterpieces stamped with their own personality in the process—these are instances, to which any number could be added, of the unquestioning readiness of the poet to use a traditional world as the agent or fable of his subject matter. And it must be remembered that when his information about this traditional world comes not from another poet but from the relatively unimpassioned records of history, nevertheless it is still touched with something of the recorder's personality, differentiating it by so much from the actual life that is under his own direct observation and between which and his own vision no other mind intervenes. The reason why the traditional world may, in spite of this, remain as fruitful for his purpose as the world

of daily affairs in which he moves is that, before he can succeed as a poet, he has to recreate his material in the light of his own vision as much in one case as the other, and the whole value of his work lies in this act of recreation. It is really not in the smallest degree easier for a man to-day to see a motor-bus in Oxford Street with any personal and vivid realization than it is for him so to see a chariot in the streets of imperial Rome. The point is that if he has been able to see the bus with any sharpness of impression, the experience will enable him to see the chariot in the same way, while if the bus has gone by and he has had no such experience, then he can know nothing more of the chariot than he may learn with the mind of the duller antiquarian. If, possessed of the faculty of seeing, he chooses to write about the bus, it is clearly the very inanity of criticism that complains that a bus is not a poetical subject ; but if, with his faculty alert from immediate experience, he realizes the chariot and chooses to write about that, it is equally inane to say that this is not a subject of contemporary interest. When the poet has proved his power of personal realization, we have no right to make further conditions, for he can prove this only by bringing to the shaping of his subject, whatever

it may be, the intensity born of his own contact with reality. Nor should it be forgotten that any man's direct experience of actual event is extremely limited, and to suggest that the artist should confine himself to such experience is to suggest that his art should be cut off from what is often the greater part of the most fertile material upon which his mind can work. What we know of event by report is at least as important in itself as what we know by observation. It is, indeed, through observed event that our perceptive faculties are trained, and it is a mistake to say that a poet is of limited power because, as sometimes happens (Mr W. H. Davies is a notable instance in our own day), he rarely goes beyond the very limited range of observed event for his material, being at the same time justly content to make no effort to extend that range. He may in such a case sound as clear and deep and true a note as another poet who explores every possible variety of event, and just as it is a fallacy to suppose that you can learn more of human nature by travelling the world than you can in your own street, so it is a fallacy to suppose that Byron magnificently sweeping the landscape of Europe into his verses is nearer to the heart of nature, and speaking with profounder knowledge, than John

Clare when he sings, season by season, half a dozen Northamptonshire fields. But most temperaments, having developed the perceptive faculty by exercising it upon event arising in their own direct experience, are eager to apply it to a wider range of event. The difference between the two kinds of temperament is, perhaps, a psychological obscurity into which nothing would be gained by inquiring; in any case, the fact that it exists is all that is to the present purpose. And in absorbing this event that comes to it by report, the perceptive faculty may work as significantly as in its realization of the event in its own direct experience. The poet, his mind alert, may be as truly moved by a friend's recital of experience as by any adventure of his own. And if the poet may thus respond to contemporary report which, however crude it is, must nevertheless have moved some degree along the process of shaping the raw material of experience, with what reason can we ask him to be deaf to that other and greater world of report which is history and legend or these things transmuted by poets who have gone before him? If he cannot distinguish between using this recorded experience as material for his own art and the clumsy pretence that the art by which that experience has been recorded is his own, he is fatally

defective as a poet, but it is absurd to make the danger of such failure a pretext for forbidding to the poet what amounts to far the greater part of all accessible experience. All we have to do is to be sure that the faculty of experiencing is his own ; for the rest, he must be free to range where he will in its exercise.

We have considered the metrical form, the diction, and the subject-matter of poetry in their relation to tradition. There remains one more question, or, perhaps, it is rather another aspect of the last of these three considerations, namely, whether poetry is in danger of falling into a dully conventional manner of approach to its subject matter. Take, for example, that perennial source of poetry, the Spring. If we allow that the poet may select the flowers and buds and bird-song of April as a fitting subject for his poetry, that he may celebrate them in a metrical form that, being traditional, is yet alive with his individual rhythmic sense, and that while he is inventing a diction of his own, a distribution of words that is witness to his own subtle perception of the life that is in them, he may still call the fields green or the sky blue or the birds happy without wholly forfeiting his claim to distinction, is there not yet something false in the reiteration with

which one poet after another tells us that his mood in perceiving this phenomenon of Spring is one of mysterious excitement and elation? Is not this as much a conceit of the mind as, say, the conventional daily pretence that we are anxious about the health of acquaintances in whom we have not the smallest personal interest? Does not the poet, in fact, profess this mood of elation because it is the traditional habit of poets to do so? I have chosen a very simple example, which may be said to answer itself, and yet in its character it touches an important and much misunderstood poetic principle. The poet is often subjected to angry criticism because the mood in which he considers his subject-matter is one already commonly used on like occasion. The answer to the charge is that a mood is no more the peculiar province of an individual poet than the common metrical resources and the words of his language or the general stock of human experience can be, and that, like these, his mood, whatever its colour may be, becomes interesting for us if in his expression of it he convinces us not that it is a new mood, but that he has truly informed it with his own consciousness. It is conceivable that a man should be dejected by the coming of Spring, but it is undoubted that nearly all men are in fact elated.

And it is idle to ask that the poet should prove his distinction by finding some new mood in which to contemplate the Spring. What we want him to do is to convince us of the elation that he feels, no matter though a thousand poets have felt elation at the same experience before. As I say, in so simple an example the truth of the conclusion is self-evident ; yet the poet is in effect too often scolded for not being moved at the approach of Spring by anger, or fear, or indignation, or some other such original and inappropriate emotion.

It may be interesting, before leaving the subject, to examine a single short passage in the light of the views advanced. A dozen lines from a poem of Marvell, the most famous lines of an acknowledged masterpiece, will, I think, illustrate every condition of my argument.

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.
> Thy beauty shall no more be found,
> Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
> My echoing song ; then worms shall try
> That long-preserved virginity,
> And your quaint honour turn to dust,
> And into ashes all my lust.
> The grave's a fine and private place,
> But none, I think, do there embrace.

Here, in the first place, is a verse-measure that had already in Marvell's time long been established in English poetry, and yet how subtly in every phrase does it respond to a new imagination working at high creative pressure.

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot hurrying near,
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of vast eternity.

Every beat of it is nervous with Marvell's own rhythmic sense. We observe, too, that there is no anxiety to avoid the traditional devices in diction of which we have spoken. We find almost the very phrases that have been mentioned. Not the "blue sky," but "vast eternity" serves as well, and then we have "Time's winged chariot," and lust turning to ashes, which means that the lover "burns with love" only instead of the "burns with rage" of our instance. "Thou" was more fitly used three hundred years ago than it is now, but even Marvell is hesitant about it, since he uses both "thy" and "your" in the same passage. And yet, notwithstanding all this simple readiness to accept tradition, with what superb mastery does the whole diction become the poet's own creation:

then worms shall try
That long-preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.
The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

This is truly lordship of the word. Finally, there is the subject-matter; the lover's exhortation to his mistress merely not to let youth go by unfulfilled. The lover's mind since lost antiquity had so been preoccupied before Marvell, and yet, again, how brightly the experience flows anew under this vivid faculty of experiencing; and the mood in which the experience is approached is that one of gallant and passionate intensity of persuasion that is almost universally common to the occasion, but it is that mood made this poet's own with immortal distinction. They are not careful overmuch, these poets, of the dangers of tradition; they can dare to profit by its service, for they are armed by their own vitality against its domination.

I wandered lonely as a cloud
  That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
  A host of golden daffodils ;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
  And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
  Along the margin of a bay ;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced ; but they
  Outdid the sparkling waves in glee ;
A poet could not but be gay
  In such a jocund company ;
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought :

For oft, when on my couch I lie
  In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
  Which is the bliss of solitude ;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

The Daffodils—WORDSWORTH

THE more we consider the nature of poetry, the more adequate and precise does Milton's stipulation appear. It must, we remember, be simple, sensuous,

and passionate, conditions which Coleridge elaborates, not unhelpfully, thus—single in conception, abounding in sensible images, and informing them all with the spirit of the mind. To take these essential qualities and refer them to the poem that we are considering: "simple," it seems to me, implies not only singleness of conception, but also a corresponding singleness of expression; it denotes, in fact, the achievement of the artistic form that conveys complete perception from one mind to another, and, as it is a condition that relates to the finished poem with all its contributory parts, it may best, I think, be considered last instead of first, as Milton puts it. First, then, we are told that it must be sensuous, or abounding in sensible images. The virtue of an image to the poet's reader is that it forces his mind in the most direct manner to an unembarrassed act of creation, to a motion having something of the lucid vitality that is the poet's own. It is always possible for us to see a thing with the physical eye dully, without any consequent act of sharp mental realization. But when a poet sees a thing with sufficient intensity to translate it from its own natural expression to a mental image recorded in words, he not only proves his own realization of the object, but makes it imperative that we, in reading

his words, shall perform an act of realization ourselves or get from him nothing but empty sound. So communicative of life is the poet's created image of a natural object, that many minds, while they are still relatively insensitive to the natural object in itself, respond to the poet's realization of it with a realization of their own. This mental state of realization, it must be noted in passing, is altogether more vivid than that of mere appreciation. Few people would be likely to see a blowing bed of daffodils at a lakeside without some heightening of emotion; but even fewer, perhaps, would see it with that quickening of formal vision which it is the highest of our hopes to foster, since it is the condition of understanding, of justice. When, however, we see nothing with the physical eye, but read of—

> A host of golden daffodils;
> Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
> Fluttering and dancing in the breeze,

we either perform a complete act of mental realization, or we experience nothing at all. The image that is before us cannot be perceived with the blurred appreciation through which we may so easily see the natural object; if it exists for us at all it exists lucidly, completely. Although the

philosophers may tell us that the natural object cannot exist apart from the beholding mind, it is clear that it may be beholden by a succession of minds without inducing any vivid realizing movement in one of them; but those lines of the poet cannot operate in this way, since either they convey nothing, or the mind in perceiving the image that is created in them is really perceiving an image that it has itself created. There is another example of this direct imaging in Wordsworth's poem:

> Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
> Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

But the image in poetry sometimes fulfils a more complex function than this. The stimulus of mind such as is received from the creation of a simple image, as those just mentioned, becomes yet greater and subtler when the process is the dual one of perceiving the image of one natural object through the creation of that of another. When the mind performs this act of co-relating the unrelated [1] it is being educated for its most fruitful activity, and it is the poet who most habitually helps us towards

[1] I owe this admirable phrase to my friend, Mr H. P. Morrison. Whether he invented it or discovered it in the depths of his French learning, I do not know, but it is too good not to steal as readily as if it were the commonplace of criticism that it deserves to be.

this liberation. The poet presents to us two separate simple images, "I wandered lonely," and "a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills." Each has an independent being, and before we can proceed to understanding of his thought, we have to recreate each of them separately in our own mind. But his concern at the moment is with the fact of his loneliness; and to express this with the greatest possible force, he states it first in one simple image, then creates another and wholly unrelated image, carries over our attention from the governing idea of loneliness in the first image to this particular characteristic of the second, and applies it back again to the original conception upon which it operates with enormously increased intensity. Thus, again, in

> The waves beside them danced; but they
> Outdid the sparkling waves in glee . . .

and, very splendidly, in

> Continuous as the stars that shine
> And twinkle on the milky way,
> They stretched in never-ending line
> Along the margin of a bay. . . .

This, then, is what we mean when we say that a poem should be sensuous or abounding with sensible images, and we see the value that this quality has in bracing our minds. We may now examine what is

meant by the claim that a poem should, further, be passionate, or, as Coleridge says, informed throughout with the spirit of the mind.[1]

By passionate, it must be remembered, we mean something more than emotional intensity. Coleridge reminds us that the word, as Milton uses it, implies an intellectual quality, a power, beyond the translation of the vivid perception into an image, of giving a whole poetic conception intellectual stability, of informing it, as it were, not only with sensitiveness but also with the proportions of lucid thought. It is a common error to think of the intellect as being cold and dry, an energy with which poetry should have as little to do as possible. The fact is, however, that while poetry may achieve durable charm without this quality, which is in effect what Rossetti called fundamental brain-work, no poetry of the highest order does exist without it.

It often happens that a young poet, in the first flush of his poetic sensibility, enchants us by the very rapture of imaginative experience through which he is passing, but it is not until he has been

[1] I do not think that it necessarily follows that because these demands that Milton makes must be met before a poem can be acclaimed as satisfying us in all respects, a poem that disregards one or another of them must be wholly a failure.

working for some years that we are able to tell whether he has the profounder gift of transforming intellectual power into passion. If he does not develop this faculty the result is inevitably a barren maturity following upon a rapidly exhausted flight of early song. Wagner spoke wisely when he said that before he could tell whether a man was truly a poet he must know whether he could sing when he was forty. We have known instances in our time of poets who have thus disappointed enthusiastic and reasonable hope. The reaction that has followed upon the excited applause that greeted the work of such a poet as Stephen Phillips has been bitter in proportion to the exaggeration of the welcome. But the one is unjustified and cruel as the other was unjustified and hysterical. Phillips's early work had, and will always retain, an undeniable charm. That it clearly echoed the work of other poets is no condemnation, since as much may be said of the early work of any of the masters. Here was a poetic sensitiveness, ardent, sufficiently personal to make its own ventures, provoking in the poet an acute sense of a certain stiff verbal beauty, and communicating delight to any ungrudging reader. But there was behind its sensitiveness no intellectual staying power, and once the charming energy of youth had

spent itself, there was no more durable faculty waiting to exercise the poet's gift.

Perhaps the most notable instance in our own time of a poet who has, on the other hand, shown this development from the poetry of enchanting sensibility to that of intellectual passion is to be found in Mr W. B. Yeats. It is instructive, as showing the relative inability of readers who respond readily enough to the slighter graces of poetry to appreciate the profounder beauty of this passion, to hear it said, as it often is, that this poet's later work lacks the enchantment of his earlier. To a right understanding, Mr Yeats's work has grown steadily in significance from the first, and this because of its surely maturing brain work. In Wordsworth's poem, simple in occasion as it is, we have this quality working with steady incandescence. Down to the second line of the third stanza we have a perfectly shaped statement and elaboration of the image, growing in intensity to the marvellous figure of the flowers outdoing the sparkling waves in glee. So far we have, created by a consummate master, that essential part of poetry which is so championed by certain writers in these later days who, while they do well enough to remind us of an eternal necessity, seem, by their assumption of the title *imagiste*, to

forget that their aim has been part of the aim of every poet of consequence since the beginning. But it is at this point that Wordsworth shows us that the poet's business does not end with the creation of an image, but that he must go beyond this to the application of his image to requirements of profound and governing thought. It is here that perhaps the poet's greatest danger lies, and his greatest glories for the winning. Merely to make his creation the occasion for some trite moral reflection is to debase his art and waste our time. What he has to do is so to focus his intellect upon the image that he has created as to be able not only to make us realize the image itself, but also to perceive with passionate understanding the significance of that image in the whole texture of our lives. We may observe then with what exquisite precision Wordsworth achieves this end. First he tells us that he could not but be gay in such a jocund company, then that he was receiving some virtue without knowing what it was :

> I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
> What wealth the show to me had brought.

Then in the last stanza, with that lucidity to which the whole difficult world of the brain is

touched in rare moments at the great artist's bidding, we have the philosophical application of the poetic conception made, and made, in Milton's full use of the word, passionately:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the daffodils.

This is a perfect example of Coleridge's "informing all with the spirit of the mind." Its value to us as readers cannot be set too highly. Poetry which freely complies with this demand rescues the artist's office finely from the last possible designs of the *dilettante* mind which, at the risk of falling away altogether from life, supposes that the creation of an image is a sufficient end in itself. To be *dilettante* in the arts is, indeed, more admirable than to be pedestrian, but the artist who has any understanding of his responsibility refuses one course no less than the other.

We have finally to consider the quality of simplicity which Milton places first among his conditions of poetry. The fundamental obligation of the poet to translate the formlessness of life into intelligible

form for our understanding must not be confused, as it often is, with the banal statement in lifeless terms of generalizations with which we are already familiar. For example, we all know as a matter of workaday experience that a charge to goodness, at the expense if need be of cleverness, is sound enough in itself. But when Kingsley [1] says :

> Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,

he is not being simple in any real poetic sense, but merely playing up to the platitude that is already established in our minds, and relying upon that for his effect and not upon any creative perception of his own.

He is, profoundly, not being simple at all in the way that Milton means. He is, rather, setting down an obvious and widely current conclusion of an extremely complex and difficult psychological question, the obscure nature of which he leaves untouched. The simplicity by which the poet gains distinction is that which seizes some illusive operation of the mind upon natural objects and so expresses it that what was incomprehensible to us before becomes suddenly defined. In other words, the poet must make a

[1] My use of Kingsley as an example in this connection does not lessen my admiration for the poet of *The Sands of Dee*.

simple statement, but it must be a statement of something that without his vision must have remained dark and formless. Nothing could be more superbly simple, for example, than:

> Nothing extenuate
> Nor set down aught in malice; then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well.

But in two lines here is recorded a whole voyage of psychological insight. It may be added that since no experience is ever final, an endless succession of poets may bring simplicity to the same pre-occupation, and each give us delight and satisfaction in turn. Even the same poet may do this himself on many occasions:

> This life is but a shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.

And again:

> We are such stuff
> As dreams are made of and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

And again:

> Golden lads and girls all must
> As chimney sweepers come to dust.

And yet again :

> Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea
> But sad mortality o'ersways their power.

And lastly, to give but one more of the numerous examples which Shakespeare alone might supply :

> Of all the wonders that I have yet heard,
> It seems to me most strange that men should fear ;
> Seeing that death, a necessary end,
> Will come when it will come.

In Wordsworth's *Daffodils* we have a remarkable instance of this first necessity in poetry. The poem in its meaning is clear for any reader. We leave it with a perfectly formed realization, reached through a sharply defined and particular instance, of the pleasure that may come to us from remembered moments of ecstatic experience. But we are made free of this simplicity of perception only through this subtle psychological analysis on the part of the poet. The phrase,

> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude,

is magnificent in its simplicity, because the phenomenon which is here reduced to plain terms is not one of simple appearance in itself, but so intricate that for all the tens of millions of people who had

experienced it not one before Wordsworth had been able to arrest it with the perfect touch of definition. Of the value for us which this quality gives to poetry it need only be said that without it we can understand nothing, or at most something which is not worth our understanding; with it every true poem is treasure-trove for us, giving us that rarest spiritual satisfaction which we experience when we can suddenly resolve obscurity, and know our minds liberated from confusion. We may now summarize the impression that Wordsworth's poem yields to alert reading, thus: our perceptions are quickened by having to create images to correspond to those created by the poet. These quickened senses are then directed by the poet's intellectual passion to a relation of these particular images to a presiding vision of life and experience. Then, by the primary creative act of the poet, the bringing of material into shape, these processes of our mind become definable in our own consciousness: are complete.

The Heroic in Art

"Our poets have always blessed the world," said an Indian to me the other day, "and so many of yours seem to be engaged in reviling it." He said it sadly, as though to bless was the poet's right office. Which, indeed, it is, and this newest age of poetry is in danger of forgetting it. "Let us praise famous men and our fathers that begat us," is a challenge in a spirit which is too often denied by one of censure and reforming anxiety. To censure and reform are well enough, and the artist, as reasonably as another, may lend himself to these in his spare time, but the less he has to do with them as an artist the better for his art and for us. It is no good urging that the iniquities of the time are so deep as to preoccupy even the artist's mind. It has always been a wicked world, and we shall no doubt presently be examples to our erring posterity. And yet, remembering with admiration the scoldings of Pope and Byron and—who else is there?—we reflect that the poets have generally found it a world to bless, worth blessing. They have denounced folly and evil freely enough it is true; Milton, Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, even Shakespeare himself, could be terrible in anger, but it was but in harmony as it were with their praise, and it was always directed

rather against evil than against the evil man. Some of our writers to-day seem to divide mankind into two classes. There are those of whom they disapprove, and these are to be labelled as of marked inferiority; and there are those of whom they—faintly—approve, and these they take under their patronage, and use for disciplinary purposes against the others. The element of wonder is not in their work. They do not praise great men and their fathers who were before them. They do not want to praise anything. They know that it is a wicked world, and their own virtue is in a continual state about it. They have seen through the heroic, and they are not going to be caught in any ridiculous postures of benediction.

I am not, perhaps I need hardly say, thinking of the gossip of artists and poets one about another. The little men never know how to behave themselves in this matter, the bigger ones do, and that is all there is to be said about it. It needs character and the finer parts of courtesy to be able to say that you don't care for a man's work without making it appear that you suspect him of something or another personally obscene. "Pompous poet left over from the nineteenth century," says a critic of Sir William Watson in a recent publication. It

may amuse some people, though it is hard to believe it. For myself, I see no difference between that and spitting in Sir William Watson's face across the dinner table; one is as much an offence against common decency as the other, and this without any reference whatever to poetic worth. It is a remark that has not even the merit of intending to correct; it is intended to hurt, wantonly, and is contemptible. And it is of a kind common in the gossip of which I have spoken, but it is important only by the standards of gossip, and has no relation to the far more serious question of the artist's attitude towards life in his art. In this some of the most gallant and chivalrous men in contemporary literature have been, it seems to me, misled into too brooding a pity over a lost world. The great tragic poets have always seen that man in the end was greater than the ruin in which he fell, even though the ruin was of his own character and resolution. Do we learn this from Mr Galsworthy, for example? And I ask the question out of an affectionate admiration for almost everything that Mr Galsworthy has written. Even Mr Shaw has spent half his life in pointing out how stupid man is rather than singing how magnificently tragic he is, and Mr Shaw has greater genius and a larger heart, I think, than any writer

later than Mr Hardy. And where the masters justify themselves by their own excellence, the lesser men fall into mere plaintiveness. Where Mr Shaw and Mr Galsworthy are gravely or wittily compassionate, Mr —— and Mr —— are petulant, waspish, tiresome.

The contrast in poetry is evident everywhere. It is true that nearly all bad poetry, to-day as always, is of the vague visionary kind that calls out that "all's right with the world" without a glimmering of Browning's philosophic basis. But a thing is not to be judged by its abuses, and never more than at this moment has the mind of man been hungry for the poetry of assertion, weary of that of negation. To stir the imagination poetry must first have the essential qualities of sharpness, definition, intimacy. To hear someone asserting that man is divine and the rest of it, without any conviction arising from careful examination of the premises and without any personality of expression, is revolting. The pretended prophet is the most ridiculous figure among men. But, given this fundamental thought, it is inspiriting to find how commonly the poets do conclude that, in the greatest sense, all's right with the world, and that those who return from their speculative travels with this assurance upon

their lips are they who most deeply move their fellows and throw out the widest influence. Mr Masefield is a case in point. Mr Ralph Hodgson is another. Mr Masefield has provoked a certain amount of criticism on technical grounds, naturally enough, but he has provoked a great deal of savage antagonism for the strangely inadequate reason that he, as a poet, has found the world beautiful, and man noble, and has been at no loss to say so as repeatedly as possible. But while some smaller poets than he engaged themselves for the most part in trying to create poetry not out of great love but, as a recent writer in the *Times* very aptly put it, out of faint dislikes, have mowed at Mr Masefield in distress, the very considerable public that reads poetry with understanding and as a spiritual necessity have found in him a poet who is a master of his craft on the one hand, a precisian, an aristocrat of words, and on the other hand a man of great humility in the presence of life, one who thinks of himself as superior to nothing, one who understands, one who devoutly and in joy blesses the world. And the public buys his books, and reads and cherishes them, and knows that he is a poet of durable worth against all the complaints of envy or perversity. The same may be said of Mr

Hodgson. His *Song of Honour* blesses the world, knows the world for a heroic thing, is not ashamed of its fervours. I think of poems like this when I remember the critic who thought it indelicate of me to make Abraham Lincoln in my play kneel in prayer after he had accepted his nomination. To name another poet, perhaps those who have followed Mr J. C. Squire's work will observe, as I seem to do, a heartening transition from the poorer manner to the finer.

There are difficulties in both directions from this middle position, I know. Some admirable poets, immensely interesting to all who care for the art of poetry and make all the workings of the mind their province, have little of this worshipping serenity. They are chiefly troubled with their own spiritual or intellectual difficulties, curious, remote, having always some revelation in them not quite liberated. Their excellence must always escape many minds by nature sympathetic. John Donne was such a one. Mr de la Mare in something like half of his poetry (the other half is all happy lucidity) is another. In the other direction we have the poets of assertion who win a large and, I suppose, a sincere following, and yet have none of the stricter qualities of poetry at all. But it is inexact to say

of these that they win their popularity for the same reasons that Mr Masefield and those others win theirs. There is the first question always of liking poetry or not liking it. Mr Masefield may have more readers than Donne, but it is impossible to read either if you do not like poetry, and it is equally impossible to read Mr —— or Miss ——, who have many more readers than those two poets together, if you do like it. The point is that, given the essential poetic quality in each case, the generality of people who know what that quality is will instinctively respond to the poet who blesses the world, and neglect the one who accuses it.

This movement of popular desire is nowhere marked more clearly to-day than in the drama. The new English-speaking theatre owes an immeasurable debt to Ibsen. Not that Ibsen's plays themselves are ever likely to be very readily intelligible to an English audience, and for that matter one is a little tired of the critics who exclaim against our perversity when we don't take to some Russian or Scandinavian idiom of construction as though it were our own. An Englishman or American need not be wholly imbecile because he can't quite get the hang of Tchechov or Strindberg in the theatre. Nevertheless Ibsen did us an immense service. He taught the English stage

again that the beginning of good drama is good writing and honest thinking. But the men who under his influence gave their own genius to the cleansing of our theatre of much that was false and incompetent, were very largely his disciples also in mistrusting the heroic, remembering rather how ridiculous the heroic had become than how excellent it is in its own proper being. And after the splendid leaders of this revolt we had a glut of playwrights who were obsessed with the dramatic merits of overcrowded back parlours and the seedy black coats of elderly bank clerks. The first direction of every new play was pretty certain to be something like this: "It is the sitting-room of a lower middle-class family in the congested neighbourhood of a large industrial town. The wall-paper, furniture and carpet are alike faded and in lamentable taste. Mrs ——, faded like the rest, a woman of fifty, who speaks in a tired and querulous voice, is mending stockings. Her husband, a small man with a weak mouth and a little ragged beard, is reading the evening newspaper over his supper. His frayed cuffs are laid on the table beside him . . .," and so on, desperately. Sometimes a dramatist using this genre could inspire it with passion, Mr St John Ervine for example, but the general atmosphere was of a

depressed life, at best pathetic in defeat, more often negligible, never tragic or beautiful. The manner had its uses, being a necessary protest against the sham heroics of a theatre that had but two people in it, the actor-manager and his limelight man, but its moment is past, and there are signs everywhere of a larger, more imaginative life on the stage. The renascence, if renascence it is to be, has its dangers. A spurious romanticism of the kind that the hack playwright turns out so easily, is a far worse thing in the theatre than the most neurotic minor realism, and the insincere triumph-of-virtue dramatist is an even worse pest than his fellow poet. But we may look hopefully enough for dramatists who again shall bless the world as some of the poets are doing, men who will be simple in the presence of great themes and handle them without fear, not evading beauty with a shame-faced jest or confusing the heroic spirit with sentimentality. Then we shall be braced again in the theatre as the Greeks and the Elizabethans must have been. For, if I may be forgiven for quoting words of my own:

> When the high heart we magnify
> And the sure vision celebrate,
> And worship greatness passing by,
> Ourselves are great.

John Milton

John Milton, by common consent of critical opinion, holds a place among the first three great English poets. This is not to say that there are not a dozen, or, perhaps, even twenty, writers in the succession of English poetry who at times in individual quality touch a height equal to Milton's own. The word great is one that is commonly used about poets, often too easily, and generally, I suppose, with a difference. What is meant at the moment is that Milton stands pre-eminently for a very important kind of achievement in poetry, and, so far as can be seen in perspective up to our own day, there are hardly more than two other poets of whom the same thing can so definitely be said. There were many poets among the Elizabethans who in their best moments had as clearly the stuff of poetry in them as Shakespeare himself, but in breadth and consistency of performance Shakespeare transcends them all. It may be said that there is nothing which they did that he did not do as well and generally better. He was the chief and crowning glory of a vast range of poetic activity, practised by many men of great endowments, and, profiting as he did by their efforts and example, he brought the whole movement to its most perfect expression. So that,

both by his personal quality and the actual volume of his work, it is of Shakespeare that we think instinctively as *the* great poet of his time. Because his time happened to be one of peculiar virtue as an inspiration to poetry, a time when the nation, both in adventure and culture, was first becoming delightedly aware of its own splendour and vitality, and was content to enjoy the spectacle of life, and share in its ardours purely for their own invigorating sake, without reducing them to moral or social problems, he comes to our minds always, perhaps, as the greatest poet of all. After him there are two other poets in the English story of whom something of the same kind may be said, John Milton and William Wordsworth. Circumstances of history made it impossible for either of these to inform their work with quite the same happy ease of spiritual youth that marks even the tragedies of Shakespeare, but each in his own way pre-eminently stood for one of the great natural movements in English poetry. After Wordsworth there is no poet of whom we can yet be quite sure in this matter. There are many whose work is certain of individual fame for ever, but none of whom we can yet say that he, above all others, most clearly embodied that strange urge in one direction which underlies all the manifold workings of an epoch.

John Milton's claim to greatness by this standard rests, to put it very briefly, on his unwearying desire, implicit through all his work and once plainly confessed, to "justify the ways of God to men." The whole Puritan revolutionary movement in England was something more than a protest against the evil doing of Charles the First. That was the occasion of its immediate expression in arms, but behind it all there was something far more constructive than this indignation, splendid though that was. The Elizabethan age—the accepted definition is as good as another—had been one of immense unquestioning activity. Physical adventure, the crossing of great seas in small boats, a childlike gaiety of response to the colour and arrogance of Renaissance culture that poured into the mind of the country from Italy, it was all a very festival of ardent and powerful youth. That, we know, is not the complete story, or, rather, a story with no need of qualification. Squalor and pedantry and mincing logic were not unknown, but these were accidental to, and not characteristic of, the time, which remained essentially one of eager and unquestioning joy in life, a finely irresponsible joy it may almost be said. When this impulse had spent itself, and the magnificence of youth had passed, there followed a time when the

conscience of the nation became a deliberate thing, setting itself to assess the ardours of a day now gone. It was this spirit of argued judgment, as distinguished from simple and delighted acceptance, that was at the very roots of the whole Puritan revolution in England. It was not necessarily an angry judgment nor a self-righteous one, nor even a grudging one, but it was judgment, and its high priest was John Milton.

The outline of Milton's life may be told in a few words. The son of a middle-class family, he was born in London in 1608, was educated at St Paul's School and Christ's College, Cambridge, where he graduated in 1629, wrote most of his shorter poems, including *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, *Comus* and *Lycidas*, before he was thirty, went on the Continental Tour, and at the age of thirty-two, having become the tutor of his nephews, he seemed to have forsaken poetry for political and social pamphleteering. He signalized his marriage to Mary Powell in 1643 by a pamphlet on *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*—not, it may be said, without very considerable provocation—which was followed by *Areopagitica* in 1644. In 1649, after the execution of the King, he was made Latin Secretary to the Council of State, and continued his controversial writing

with *Eikonoklastes*, a reply to the King's book, and other essays which contain some of the finest and most vehement, if not best tempered, prose in the language. His blindness began in 1651, and among his secretarial assistants was the poet Andrew Marvell. Losing his official position at the Restoration, he was for a time in hiding. He married for a second time in 1656, and again a third in 1662. His remaining years were spent partly at Chalfont St Giles and partly in London ; he died at the age of sixty-six in 1674, and was buried in St Giles's, Cripplegate.

In 1645 he had collected his smaller poems for publication, and a second edition of the volume was issued with additions in 1673. His great works were published, *Paradise Lost* in 1667, and *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in 1671. He is supposed to have begun writing the first of these as early as 1650, and the story of his dictating his masterpieces to his daughters is well known. His long silence as a poet in the middle of his life is difficult to explain, preoccupied though he may have been with political matters. We may, however, be sure that during the years when he was not actively writing poetry he was meditating the great work in front of him and preparing himself for a task as to the responsibility of which he was very deliberately

conscious. His muse was to address itself to "Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." And, as he tells us, in his *Apology for Smectymnuus* (1641), he believed that "He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem."

He came to the composition of the great works of his later years a good scholar, the chief intellectual champion in his country of political and religious freedom, and a man deeply versed in the sorrows and disillusions of life. In taking for his themes the fall of Satan, the redemption of the world by the Son of Man, and the sufferings of Samson, he was following the example of the Greeks in choosing stories which should be familiar to his readers. The mere invention of a fable as an exercise for his genius appealed to him no more than it did to Shakespeare, and he preferred to lavish the vast stores of his energy upon the spiritual and imaginative significance with which the mould of accepted fables could be filled. The literature which has grown up round these poems in itself forms a library of theology, poetics, and philosophy.

To attempt anything like an analysis of the vast subject matter of Milton's writings is here obviously impossible. Of the poetry itself it may at once be

said that it cannot be approached profitably in any light or easy mood. Once to have come under the spell of the serene mastery of Milton's genius is to be made free of it for ever. It is impossible once to like Milton's poetry and then to grow tired of it, but it may well sometimes be that a reader who is happy enough with some tripping or homely muse should find the ceremony of the great Puritan a little difficult, though *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, together with passages from *Comus* and *Lycidas*, can hardly fail to be pleasing to anybody. But for the rest of us there comes a time when the full glory of Milton's last period is a thing in life as inevitable in its authority as the beauty of nature itself. Matthew Arnold's " Others abide our question, thou art free " is as true of the other supreme poets as it is of Shakespeare. If we have the love of English poetry in our blood at all, we can no longer argue about :

> Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us and regain the blissful seat,
> Sing heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
> Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
> That shepherd, who first taught the chosen seed,
> In the beginning how the heav'ns and earth
> Rose out of Chaos ; or if Sion hill

Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flow'd
Fast by the oracle of God ; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent'rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th'Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th'upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st ; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss,
And mad'st it pregnant : what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support ;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

This spiritual exaltation Milton in his later works maintained, with hardly a break, for something like fifteen thousand lines. In doing it he achieved a style which in its union of opulence and severity was at the time, and has remained, without parallel. As always with the great men, the poetry transcends the argument. The argument was indeed a passionate enough conviction with Milton himself, and was the foundation from which the mighty edifice of his poetry rose. But it is the poetry itself that, in the right mood, is a defence against the ignominies of the world as hardly any other English poetry is. Milton did very ardently wish to " justify the ways

of God to men," to scourge tyranny, and to exalt the undying heroism of man. But in these things he was but one of many thousand generous spirits who have passed on earth, and his testament was made in terms of a mythology and a political temper, which in themselves are not very intimately stirring things to us to-day. But, unlike those other thousands, Milton was a great poet, and, as such, he both transcended for ever the conditions of the moment and lifted his personal passion into universal poise by the sublime certainty with which it was embodied. Poise—that is the last word when all critical analysis of Milton has been made. To read *Paradise Lost* or *Samson Agonistes*, without haste and without question, is to look upon the troubled world with untroubled eyes. The purging is not of the same kind as that effected by the great poets of the tragic human emotions, where the salvation is wrought by the spectator being moved to a God-like compassion for suffering or erring man. Reading one of the great Shakespeare tragedies we are so touched to pity that we not only feel that in the course of justice there ought to be some final compensation for the disaster which we have witnessed, but that in some strange way we have been given the power to will that it shall be so. Milton, even in *Samson Agonistes*,

where the actual fable is one of human catastrophe, does not move us in quite the same way. Here we feel not so much as we do in Shakespeare's tragedies that when all has been endured mercy will come, as it were, from some common impulse of the world to heal even the most merited suffering, but that the spirit of man can mysteriously rise clear of its own limitations and that man is, in fact, greater than the expression that he can ever give to himself in the conduct of life. Shakespeare's way is the more human, the more passionate, and the more intimately related to our common moods, but there are times when Milton can bring us a reassurance that is altogether his own.

The keen spiritual light that is over all Milton's meditation does not lessen the warmth of his humanity, a quality we are apt to forget was his when we think of him. His early poems, though they are marked already by the ceremony that in the great works was to come to such grandeur of style, are the work of a young poet moving freely about the world, generous and even gay in temper. Whatever his austerity of manner, there was no coldness at the heart of the man who could write :

> While the ploughman near at hand
> Whistles o'er the furrow'd land,

> And the milkmaid singeth blithe,
> And the mower whets his scythe,
> And every shepherd tells his tale
> Under the hawthorn in the dale. . . .

Nor, when *Paradise Lost* appeared more than twenty years later, had the note gone:

> So hand in hand they pass'd, the loveliest pair
> That ever since in love's embraces met;
> Adam the goodliest man of men since born
> His sons, the fairest of her daughters Eve.
> Under a tuft of shade, that on a green
> Stood whisp'ring soft, by a fresh fountain side
> They sat them down; and after no more toil
> Of their sweet gard'ning labour than sufficed
> To recommend cool Zephyr, and made ease
> More easy, wholesome thirst and appetite
> More grateful, to their supper fruits they fell . . .

a passage the tenderness of which is recurrent throughout the poem whenever Milton's thought for a moment leaves the height of its great argument and dwells on the human joys and sorrows of Paradise. While, however, he is thus always able to remind us of his command of the gentler things of holiday and pathos, it remains the truth that it is in a sublime philosophic conception of life, rather than in the particular and intimate lives of men and women, that his interest chiefly lies and in the expression of which his mastery is most commonly used.

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stol'n on his wing my three and twentieth year!
My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,
That I to manhood am arrived so near,
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
That some more timely-happy spirits indu'th.
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure even
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven.
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great Task-master's eye.

There at twenty-three was already the promise of the poet who in the full maturity of his power was to learn how, by pure majesty of spirit and the very magic of verse, to bring even angels into the range of our human sympathies, as in:

So spake the seraph Abdiel faithful found,
Among the faithless, faithful only he:
Among innumerable false unmoved,
Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified,
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal;
Nor number, nor example with him wrought
To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind
Though single . . .

and who when he brought these faculties to a life still generalized, but nearer to our own experience,

as at the end of *Samson Agonistes*, could achieve a moving beauty which has never been excelled in English poetry:

> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble. . . .

Although more perhaps than most poets, Milton allowed a life of affairs to encroach upon his actual poetical composition, there is no poet of whom it can be more justly said that he devoted his life to poetry. Having proved his gifts in the early poems, he determined to wait until such time as he felt himself to be equipped for a work that should not only be profound in conception but massive in volume and architecture. "Neither do I think it shame," he writes in the *Reason of Church Government urged against Prelatry* of 1641, "to covenant with any knowing reader that, for some years yet I may go on trust with him toward the payment of what I am now indebted, as being a work not to be raised from the heat of youth or the vapours of wine . . . but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit, who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge . . . to this must be added industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all

seemly and generous art and affairs. . . ." Through those years of political and religious controversy his mind was fixed constantly upon the redemption of this promise. The result of all this was that when the works came they were upon a scale that can be no more lightly apprehended by the reader than they were lightly conceived by the poet. Before we can come to anything like the full significance of Milton's great poems we must read them steadily and we must read them whole.

We may for purposes of argument do very well in dividing poets up into schools, Classical, Romantic, Realist, and so forth, but when we come to the very great men we find that in some measure or another they have the best qualities of all these different kinds. Nowhere has the case for the so-called Classic as against the Romantic method been put more lucidly than in Matthew Arnold's famous *Preface* of 1853:

> We can hardly at the present day understand what Menander meant, when he told a man who enquired as to the progress of his comedy that he had finished it, not having yet written a single line, because he had constructed the action of it in his mind. A modern critic would have assured him that the merit of his piece depended on the brilliant things which arose under his pen as he went along. We have poems which seem to exist merely for the sake of

single lines and passages; not for the sake of producing any total-impression. We have critics who seem to direct their attention merely to detached expressions, to the language about the action, not to the action itself. I verily think that the majority of them do not in their hearts believe that there is such a thing as a total-impression to be derived from a poem at all, or to be demanded from a poet; they think the term a commonplace of metaphysical criticism. They will permit the Poet to select any action he pleases, and to suffer that action to go as it will, provided he gratifies them with occasional bursts of fine writing, and with a shower of isolated thoughts and images. That is, they permit him to leave their poetical sense ungratified, provided that he gratifies their rhetorical sense and their curiosity.

This is an admirable piece of æsthetic theory and it was a point that very much needed to be made, and for that matter still needs to be made to-day in view of the common practice of modern poetry. But the argument is one which when we come to the poets themselves in their poetry—even to Matthew Arnold in his own poetry—we find to need qualification. It is true that certain poets, chiefly lyric poets, do make good their claim to our remembrance almost entirely because of the occasional verbal felicities of which Arnold speaks, and they do not achieve, or, perhaps, even aim at, that "total-impression" which the critic so rightly holds up to admiration. But this does not mean that the

poets who are masters of proportion and form on the grand scale are indifferent to the appeal of those same verbal felicities. How, for example, would Arnold account for Keats in his reckoning? The form of the *Odes*, although it is of small dimensions, has decided grandeur, and the "total-impression" is emphatic and lasting. And yet Keats took the greatest pains to "load every rift with ore." There is hardly a line without some exquisite touch of the kind that Arnold, in his enthusiasm for classic purity, seems almost to censure. As I have pointed out, no poetry could be more suggestive in this matter than Arnold's own, where the general effect is always kept in view with scrupulous loyalty to the poet's belief, but where "showers of isolated thoughts and images" are constantly breaking upon the design to our great profit.

In Milton this richness of phrase, beautiful even apart from its context, is constant. "The tann'd haycock in the mead," "The glowing violet," "Brisk as the April buds in Primrose season," "Beauty is Nature's brag," "They also serve who only stand and wait," "The marble air," "And from sweet kernals prest She tempers dulcet creams," "And calm of mind all passion spent"—such things come to the eye on almost any page. Great and

essential as the complete design is, it is not difficult ever to make Milton's inspiration clear by short passages, even phrases. But the design remains, to be discovered only by the patient and humble reader. Once to behold it, in all its lordly power and grace, is to rejoice in one of the sublime achievements of English character and of English poetry.

Robert Burns[1]

Mr Chairman, Gentlemen,—First let me thank you for the honour you do me this evening in inviting me to submit this toast to you. Some people might think that it was an invitation rashly offered, and still more rashly accepted; and yet, setting aside the question of personal fitness for the office, I do not think the ground, upon which such an objection might be advanced, a sufficient one. A critic once remarked, or complained, of me that I was an "Englishman, almost myopically so." I am happy to admit the charge—so far as I am aware it has been English, English all the way with me. But when it is suggested that an Englishman can see nothing clearly that is not English, I dissent from a manifest absurdity. It would be as reasonable to maintain that none but a Swiss can see the Alps, or none but a tailor can appreciate the elegance and beauty of clothes, as that none but a Scot can understand the poetry and the spirit of Burns. An idiomatic sense of the language in which Burns wrote is not really difficult for an Englishman, or an American for that matter, to acquire, and subject to this they may realize the essential poet in Burns as deeply as any the proudest Scot among you all.

[1] An Address delivered to the Edinburgh Burns Club, January 1924.

This, I need hardly point out, is not to disparage Burns—or Scotland. It is Burns's honour that he is a great poet, it is Scotland's that she was able to produce a great poet, not one narrowly intelligible only to a local audience, but one intelligible to all men who can catch the tones of great poetry when they are sounded.

> Leaving great verse unto a little clan,

you may remind me. Yes, but the little clan is not Scotland. If you think that, you might, indeed you must, follow your argument to its logical end, and allow that it is not Scotland, but a little part of Scotland, some corners of Ayrshire and Dumfriesshire. The little clan are those who have ears to hear.

No; an Englishman may as fitly submit this toast as a Scot. Burns is Scotland's national poet, it is true; his character and genius came wholly out of Scottish soil. But Scotland could never wish to withhold from him the admiration and the understanding of the world, of those people the world over who know what greatness of spirit and lyric mastery are. A great poet will, no doubt, present himself with some variety of character to this people and that, but then so he will to this man and that.

Burns is seen by Scotsmen, perhaps, in an aspect not quite identical with that familiar to Englishmen, but then he cannot mean precisely the same thing even to any two Scotsmen. A poet is himself—but he is himself also with as many modifications as he has readers.

This is no plea for a vague and shallow cosmopolitanism in art, or in anything else. Burns is a poet of universal significance, but he achieves that universal significance through an intensely personal character and quality, as must always be the case with such poets. And in his case the character and quality are specifically Scots—as my friend might have put it, almost myopically Scots. It may be said that his universality was possible only through his precisely national, even his parochial, emphasis. But to perceive that the heather and the rose and the orchid can flourish and be themselves in beauty only each in their natural soil, that they are each unchangeably characteristic of their own environments, is by no means to suppose that only men reared in those environments themselves can truly see the loveliness of this flower or that. Scotland's honour is not that she at last raised a poet that only she could entirely understand, but that she at last raised a poet who was Scots in every beat of his

blood and every motion of his spirit, and who yet has commanded the homage, the affection, and the understanding of mankind.

Of Burns as a poet the obvious things, and in the main the right things, have been said long since, and said often. The humour, the tenderness, and the prodigal ease of his verse are qualities that no sensitive attention can miss, and the fame of Burns the poet has, indeed, never had any hard way to make from the first. It is true that in his own time he was treated neither with practical generosity nor good judgment. Mark Twain remarked of the weather that everybody talks about it, but nobody does anything. So it was with Burns. Everybody was willing, indeed eager, to ask him to dinner, but nobody was at any pains to see that he should get his dinner to-morrow week. Large numbers of people bought his poems, even read and enjoyed them, but nobody seems to have made it his business to see that the poet should be given a fair chance of writing more. And Burns needed that—it is just shallow cynicism to pretend that the hard lot which was his to the last, a lot that made an excise gaugership at seventy pounds a year seem a liberal turn of fortune, was good for him. He left us his poetry all right; he might have left us none better whatever had befallen

him of better luck. But that makes the spectacle of his later years, those years that should have been the coming of his prime, and were instead the tale of a body and spirit worn out with poverty and frustration, no more creditable to the society in which he lived. Society was no more ignorant then in this than at other times; we should doubtless do the same thing now—very likely we are doing it. Moreover, it may be allowed that Burns was no very easy person to help, that it was difficult enough to offer help without the suggestion of patronage that his proud temper could not but reject. And, beyond that, his own passionate and inconstant will, to which none of his critics has ever borne witness half so explicitly as himself in his own poems and letters, was clearly in part at least responsible for the tragic colour in his life. Nevertheless, his contemporaries cannot be acquitted of the charge that, apart from the devotion of two or three loyal friends, they did nothing to redeem that tragedy, and this was the less pardonable from the very circumstance that they did understand that he was a poet of altogether exceptional gifts, that he was the most remarkable of all the sons of Scotland. The nature of his poetry was such that this could not be otherwise. Here was verse that had not to wait upon a

hearing; it sang itself at once from the poet's lips into the delighted consciousness of readers in all ranks, many of whom had hardly known before that there was such a thing as poetry at all. His age recognized his genius, almost with the rapture of self-fulfilment. It is the less easy to excuse his age for putting up no stiffer fight than it did for his welfare.

Of Burns's poetry I propose, as I have already hinted, to say very little, although perhaps I ought to speak of nothing else. I could add nothing fresh on this occasion to the ample analysis that has been made of it. Indeed, I think it repays analysis less than most great poetry. There it is, in its unsubtle, unlaboured magic, divinely wise but never inscrutable, or even surprising. If I were to attempt in a word the suggestion of its character, I should remark that no poetry of the highest rank has ever owed so little to the perfectly won as distinguished from the vigorous and sparkling and familiar phrase, has ever so securely left the mark of authentic imagination on a texture so nearly commonplace. It is this fact that made so fastidious and generally so just a critic as Mrs Meynell, intent always on the apocalyptic word, miss his quality altogether; it is this fact also that makes him the one great poet in our

language who is also genuinely a popular poet, one really beloved by the unlettered no less than by the lettered, by great numbers of people for whom Burns is the only exception to the rule that if they like verse at all they like it bad. It is a mistake to speak of Burns as though his interest in humanity, passionate as it was, was incomparable. Other poets have understood their fellows as profoundly and as sympathetically as he; but no other of his stature has sung his understanding in terms of so significant a simplicity.

And then, of his verse, I should add that the quality that above all has established him in the front rank of world-poet is his superb lyric modulation. This is no more than to say, as in the end must always be said, that as a poet he finally stands by the sureness of his art, his power of saying what he wants to say with all the resource of that art. As an example of this command I will, with a great deal of temerity in such a gathering, and with no hope of satisfying Scots ears, read one lyric:

O wert thou in the cauld blast
On yonder lea, on yonder lea,
My plaidie to the angry airt,
I'd shelter thee, I'd shelter thee;
Or did misfortune's bitter storms
Around thee blaw, around thee blaw,

Thy bield should be my bosom,
To share it a', to share it a'.

Or were I in the wildest waste,
Sae black and bare, sae black and bare,
The desert were a Paradise,
If thou wert there, if thou wert there;
Or were I Monarch o' the globe,
Wi' thee to reign, wi' thee to reign,
The brightest jewel in my crown
Wad be my Queen, wad be my Queen.[1]

The sentiment, even the diction of this, are not very remarkable. But upon them is that "breath and finer spirit," made sensible in a faultless lyric modulation, that transfigures them, and by such work there is no poetic company that Burns would not grace.

In conclusion, I should like for a few moments to consider the character and personality of the man. For over a hundred years Burns, no less than Shelley and Byron, has been a storm centre of controversy, and he will no doubt continue to be so for more than another hundred. There are three distinct views to one or another of which most of the disputants commit themselves. The first is that Burns was incurably profligate, whatever may have been his

[1] I do not know at what point Scots pronunciation brings "reign" and "Queen" together, but I am sure that Burns got a perfect rhyme out of them.

gift of song. This opinion was professed by Holy Willie, and by Mr James Armour when he concluded that any disgrace that might befall his daughter was better than marriage with the poet—an opinion that he modified when Burns became a figure in the fashionable world. Holy Willie and Prudent James have had their followers, may still have them, but their virtue has never been a popular one. The second view is that Burns was frail to the point of grave offence, but that his admirable qualities compel tolerance for his frailty. This, it seems, is the view most generally held, and I confess that I do not understand it. The third view is that it is a pity that we know even as much as we do about Burns's life, and that our only right concern is with his poetry.

I believe all these views to be mistaken. The first is uncommon, and negligible. The second is, as I say, perplexing. It is held by austere and upright men with strange inconsistency. Burns was sorely tempted, it is allowed, by circumstance and character, but, so the accepted story in this view goes, he was incapable in his affairs, a drunkard, and a common seducer. But—and then follow his virtues, and forgiveness. It really will not do. I ask any respectable and respected advocate of Burns on these lines, who accepts the evidence of so much squalor

and even baseness of character, and then experiences, truly enough, I am sure, a virtuous humility in forgiving, whether he would ask such a man into his home, and make him the confidant of his family, of his womenfolk ? I will refer to this view again in a moment in suggesting what I consider to be the right one. Before that I must consider the third of the views that I have mentioned. It is, I think, a confused view. No one can sensibly object to knowing as much as possible about any poet or other great man who has won the attention and applause of the world. The objection is provoked not really by the accumulation of evidence, but by the habitual confusion of people in approaching that evidence, and their failure to realize its nature and its limitations.

We know how rarely long and intimate acquaintance leaves us in assurance of full understanding of our familiar friend. And with increase of opportunity and a growing capacity in ourselves to understand at all, the less competent do we feel for censure, the more arrogant does any bearing of forgiveness seem. We have chosen our friend well, it is to be supposed, and the time for censure and forgiveness has gone. To exercise these is no longer anything but to reproach our own judgment in the choice. But if we allow that in the familiar instances of life

the evidence is always incomplete, and that our affection must remain largely founded on a faith that is secure against circumstance, how much less can we, with anything but effrontery, take upon ourselves the judgment of character as to which the evidence is at best but the casual assembling of fragments in an uncertain context? Even when a man's life is very fully documented, as in the case of Shelley and Byron and Burns, what does it amount to? The records that we have of Burns, for example, in his own and other people's letters and journals, cover no more than certain moods or aspects of a point here and there in his life; they give a partial account of, shall we say, in the aggregate, counting the days up together, six months or twelve out of his thirty-seven years. And for the rest, what do we learn from these documents—entrancing documents as they are—of what he was in the long succession of unrecorded days, in the intimate routines, in the commonplace but essential relationships of his life? How did Burns talk to his children, what were his thoughts when he went marketing, how did the common conflict of courage and remorse go with him, how little or much did he know that he was to give Scotland a leading place in the world's literature? The documents cannot tell us these

things, and for an answer to our questions we have to turn to the only coherent testimony that we can have in regard to him, his poetry. From that we should be able to realize his central character in such a way as to make any question worth asking about him easily answerable without reference to journals and confessions. And these documents are useful only as they help in some small measure to confirm and elucidate the impressions that we gather from that poetry. Such evidence is not worthless; we desire, I think, as much of it as possible. I have, for example, no sympathy with the devout hope which some people profess that we shall never discover any such evidence about Shakespeare's life—a balanced judgment would surely welcome any profusion of it that might turn up. The question is what use we are to make of these documents when we have them. It seems to me that there is one right use for them, and one only; which is to scrutinize them as wisely as we can for suggestion and help in the definition of those conceptions of the poet's nature that we bring from his poetry, but to be resolute against making from them inferences that they cannot support, and that the poetry itself generally discredits.

So, with Burns, we cannot accept the view that,

however generously, would forgive all. He is not up for our forgiveness. In these matters the letter of the evidence is nothing, the spirit everything. And the spirit here announces plainly enough that, in human terms, there is nothing to forgive. If against this spirit we insist on the letter and hold that (behind our forgiveness) there still remains the figure of a debauchee, then our forgiveness is misplaced. We cannot talk rationally about forgiveness of a man whom we cannot trust in the ordinary transactions of life, or the common decencies of behaviour, or with our daughters, a man, in short, with whom we can want to have nothing to do. If, on the other hand, we realize the utter unreliability of such disfiguring letter of evidence against the spirit of evidence, then, as I say, there is no question of forgiveness. We are then left with a man of whom, were it our fortune to know him, we should desire nothing more than that he should admit us to the privilege of his friendship, and honour us by taking all that we had to bestow in friendship without any reservation whatever.[1]

[1] It may be observed that this argument supports the view that the presentation of any historical figure will approach essential truth most nearly when the letter of evidence is freely subjected to the spirit; that it is not the fact that is important, but the significance of the fact.

In lyric quality Robert Burns at his best is unsurpassable; in lyric fertility he is, perhaps, unequalled. He is Scotland's national poet, and, through that range of lyric contact of which I have spoken, he has become in a remarkable way the apotheosis of the Scots people, a figure in which they are honoured the world over. He was born a hundred and sixty-five years ago to-day, in extreme poverty and utter obscurity, and this evening tens of thousands of people are met to celebrate the event. I ask you, gentlemen, to fill your glasses and rise to drink in silence to his immortal memory.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

I

Percy Bysshe Shelley was drowned off the harbour of Leghorne on July 8th, 1822, within a month of completing his thirtieth year. There has been more stupid and self-righteous chatter about his life, perhaps, than about that of any other great poet, with the exception of his friend Byron. He has had vindicators in plenty, but he should need none. The conduct of his private affairs was not always blameless, if there should be anybody sufficiently free of fault himself to award the blame. That with all his shortcomings in these private affairs he was also generous, greatly beloved by his friends and at least one woman of splendid character, and inspired always by an intense devotion to the abstract idea of liberty, there is ample evidence from a dozen sources. But in this, again, he was not really abnormal. At all times there are hundreds of young men about, sensitive, of swift impulses directed sometimes by good judgment, sometimes by bad, fine but not flawless in texture. Shelley, like any one of these, must have been an affectionate and attractive person to know, and no doubt sometimes a little disquieting if you happened to have your social

standards too firmly fixed. And that, in summary, is all that need be said as to the man himself, except, perhaps, to add that his character in all directions bore a little the emphasis of genius. More freely, and at times, perhaps, a little more inexplainably than is common with a liberal and passionate youth, he defied and shocked the conventions of society, sometimes even the good ones. But he was one of the most Christian beings that ever walked earth. Yet whatever our conclusions may be about that life which burnt so fiercely and touched so many far points of delight and suffering, we must at least dissent from Professor Courthope's strangely inept exclamation that certain of Shelley's work will always "draw the affection and sympathy of men towards their amiable and most unfortunate author." The Shelleys of this world are not the misfortunes of omnipotent purpose. When, however, Professor Courthope, in the same passage, refers to Shelley's vast and vague conceptions he is on safer ground. Indeed, it is almost a truism of poetic criticism that Shelley's art yields less satisfactory results to analysis than, perhaps, that of any other of the English masters. Professor Saintsbury bluntly says that such analysis is futile and that the worst thing Shelley ever wrote is better reading than the best thing ever

written about him. In a way it may be said that no poet has made surer advance from the beginning to the end of his life in the technical control of his material than did Shelley, and yet he is almost alone in having been able to impress the peculiar quality of his genius and vision on his earliest and very immature efforts no less surely than on his later masterpieces. *The Dæmon of the World*, for example, and *Alastor*, not to mention the earlier *Queen Mab*, and even less assured things, can hardly be called good poems by any reckoning. They are loose in construction, vague always in outline, uncertain in intellectual, if not in emotional, purpose, and scattered throughout with extraordinary patches of mere verbal insensitiveness. And yet, suffusing the whole there is the peculiar Shelleyan flush of beauty which signs almost any fragment of his work as surely as Milton's supremacy of style signs his own work in, say, *Lycidas*. And the quality of that beauty was constant until the end. It became much more exactly subdued to the terms of poetic art in such things as the simple wonder of *Adonais* and, in *Epipsychidion*, that marvellous snaring of an almost inconceivably subtle emotion. But the life and ardour remain those of *Queen Mab*. The frustration and protest and yearning, even the despair, which

are so largely the staple of his poetic material, are translated always into shimmering rainbow hazes. And Shelley's prophetic argument is peculiar in that it is one which cannot be argued about. His art is much more one of colour than of form, of colour which in its nebulousness often defies our understanding, and of which sometimes the only thing that we are certain is its purity.

It is, of course, impossible to state the whole question in a word like this. It would be absurd to suggest that Shelley had no sense of form. His dramas and *Adonais* alone would make it ridiculous to do so. But the austere architecture that is the chief poetic glory of Milton and Keats and Wordsworth seems to have been little his aim. Nor was the discipline in the detail of his art always as exact as is common with men of his greatness. His work is marked, as that of no other great poet, with frequent heavy-handed use of words. He writes almost like a divine improvisor who is lucky most of the time but who cannot stay to question his luck when it fails him. And in the bad moments he will use phrases that have not the poetic nerve in them at all. A line like " I think I never was impressed so much " is merely flat, and may perhaps be excused in a long poem. But when a page later we read :

> His child had now become
> A woman ; such as it has been my doom
> To meet with few . . .

we pass from mere flatness to an insensitiveness which is hardly credible in a genius so rare. And Shelley's poems contain a great number of examples of this kind of thing. In a word, he, of the great English poets, is the most given to lapses into downright bad writing. And, on the other hand, as might be expected, his most memorable moments are those in which a concept of the mind is phrased not in what may be called inspired statement, such as we find on every page of Shakespeare, but in some perfect image which gives us the delight of realizing vision apart from any philosophic consideration. When he wants to put a desolated country before us he does it by saying merely :

> Blue thistles bloomed in cities. . . .

The imagination working in that particular kind could achieve nothing more consummate than that. It is far less often that he stirs us with the other kind, the Shakespearean kind, of utterance. It is seldom that we are moved by such things in his verse as :

> Most wretched men
> Are cradled into poetry by wrong,
> They learn in suffering what they teach in song. . . .

And this is the more strange when one considers how explicitly philosophic in intention Shelley's poetry was. Keats, in a well-known passage, says to Shelley :

> I received a copy of *The Cenci*, as from yourself, from Hunt. There is only one part of it I am judge of—the poetry and dramatic effect, which by many spirits nowadays is considered the Mammon. A modern work, it is said, must have a purpose, which may be the God. An artist must serve Mammon ; he must have " self-concentration "—selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore.

That was well enough, and one sees exactly the mood in Keats from which it came, although it may be pertinently remarked that Keats was in his last work clearly moving towards just some such " purpose " himself. However that may be, there the purpose was in Shelley from the beginning, dominating his whole poetic career for good or bad, and it must be believed, in spite of much modern critical opinion to the contrary, that it was for good. Shelley very desperately did want to make the world a better place. He wanted to sing it into being a better place. He wanted to instruct people, he upbraided the tyrants, he denounced the betrayal of love fiercely and on every occasion. He preached and he

moralized, and he did these things with determination, looking upon himself as a poet with a mission, one that he would have pursued had he lived to be seventy. Being a great poet, he was justified in his purpose, and he showed, just as all the other great poets have done, only rather more expressly than they, that some such purpose in the poet's mind is really the only soil out of which complete artistic creation can spring. This does not mean that a poet must be always making us conscious of his purpose, and it may be admitted that Shelley at times was a little too insistent, but the purpose must be there or there will be no poetry. Sometimes nowadays we see poets scolded by writers of criticism for taking their poetry very seriously. It is a strange perversity that can find offence here, provided always that the purpose is subdued to art, as it was in Shelley. It would be interesting to read the reception that would be given by such writers to a poet who should to-day preface his work thus:

> The poem which I now present to the world is an attempt from which I scarcely dare to expect success, and in which a writer of established fame might fail without disgrace. It is an experiment on the temper of the public mind, as to how far a thirst for a happier condition of moral and political society survives, among the enlightened and refined, the tempests which have shaken the age in which we live.

and much more in the same strain. In fact this particular school of criticism ought on every count to throw Shelley over altogether. It is fortunate for the art of poetry that Shelley would very happily survive the event, and we should be enlightened by an honest piece of self-revelation.

II

If, as is not unlikely, some people may ask why more books on Shelley, they cannot be better answered than by Shelley's own words quoted by Mrs Campbell at the end of her book,[1] "A great poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted all its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and an unconceived delight." And it may be said at once that both these books[1] are valuable additions to the formidable body of Shelley literature, and that they may be read with profit even by the poet's best-informed students. It is, indeed, as will be shown, those who know Shelley's life and works most

[1] *Shelley and the Unromantics*, by Olwen Ward Campbell. *Ariel*, A Shelley Romance, by André Maurois. Translated by Ella D'Arcy.

intimately who will be likely to get most advantage from the books now before us.

When two volumes on one subject appear at the same time the critic is naturally tempted to compare them with each other. The temptation is generally one to be resisted, since more often than not there will be no useful points of comparison. But in the present instance Mrs Campbell and Monsieur Maurois (admirably translated by Miss Ella D'Arcy) do, in their defects as well as in their qualities, decidedly measure and supplement each other. Mrs Campbell's book is probably the best organizing of the Shelley material that has ever been made. And yet it has many faults, and the chief of them is that the term "organizing" is not an exact one to apply to it. Mrs Campbell has acquired a familiarity with Shelley's poetry, and every record that has been left of his life, that has now clearly become an intimate habit of her mind. Her interpretation of the poems and data is, moreover, in almost every respect convincing. It is impossible to read her work without having great respect for her own intelligence and gift of sympathy. She says hardly a thing about Shelley that is not at once perfectly documented and finely conceived. But her book somehow leaves a cumulative impression that is not as incisive as it ought to be. Putting it

down, we nearly always found on returning to it that we had lost our place. It is not that the actual writing is bad; on the contrary, most of it is extremely good. Nor, on the other hand, is it merely that practically all the material that Mrs Campbell is investigating is after all pretty well known already, and that on returning to her pages we are not quite sure for the moment whether it is here or elsewhere that we have already read what is in front of us. The difficulty is that Mrs Campbell, with all her unusual gifts as a writer, which we gladly recognize, and which are turned in this book to really valuable account, seems to lack the one faculty of giving her work the crowning elucidation of an easily mastered design. It is a pity, because the defect may deprive of some of its proper influence what is in substance worthy to be put in the front rank of critical literature.

In three other respects Mrs Campbell's book is provocative. The chapters devoted to literary criticism seem inadequate, chiefly, perhaps, because they are summary and out of proportion to the biographical matter of the volume, which is exhaustive. This is not to say that Mrs Campbell does not make many extremely acute observations upon Shelley's poems and upon poetry in general, although she occasionally allows herself what she must surely realize in her

heart is so cheaply epigrammatic a turn as, "No really great poet is a poet purely of Nature. The eighteenth century was alive with poets of Nature; the twentieth century is dead with them." We have little room in which to justify by examples our opinion, good or bad, of Mrs Campbell's critical powers, but as an instance of many valuable things that she says may be given this, of Wordsworth:

> He made the mistake of supposing that the suffering and emotions of an old dalesman are *ipso facto* more stirring and instructive than those of a man in a high position—a king or any heroic public figure—and this is really an anti-social, and thus an inartistic, conception.

Secondly, in the more important part of her book, the author occasionally disregards her own excellent principle of tolerant understanding, as in her treatment of Mary Shelley, from whose own words she quotes the pathetic request, "Do not awaken the deep waters that are full of briny bitterness. I never wish anyone to dive into the secret depths," and at the same time scrutinizes her character with what seems to be something less than perfect charity. This observation leads us to our third and more general reservation about the book, and, indeed, about almost all such books, which is that in matters of character they are apt to assume that the available

evidence, however ample it may be, is more conclusive than it really is. We seem to know an immense amount about Shelley and the bewildering group of people of whom he was the most divinely appointed spirit. Mrs Campbell certainly knows more about them than any of us, and she would no doubt at once challenge the word " bewildering." In the light of her devoted learning and natural gifts of perception they do not seem bewildering to her, she is clear that she knows them precisely. But does she ? Might not a week at Edinburgh, and another week at Marlowe, and a share in the sad little journey with the donkey, and a month or two at Pisa and San Terenzo, modify her impressions, and even revise some of them ? We cannot tell these things ; but we are convinced that minute investigations of character, when they are concerned not with creative purposes but with the history of people who actually lived, should always be made with a fuller sense of their own necessarily tentative nature than they generally are. At the same time it is to be gratefully admitted that Mrs Campbell has almost certainly in the main fixed the truth about the kind of being that Shelley was, and it is in this fundamental respect that her book has a commanding advantage over Monsieur Maurois's witty and perspicuous narrative.

Ariel succeeds just where Mrs Campbell's book relatively fails. It, too, takes the known facts of Shelley's life, and with very little invention or trimming presents them in plain narrative form. But Monsieur Maurois's handling of his material is masterly. The outline of his romance is perfectly contrived. We leave *Ariel* with an exact realization of all that its author intended to say. And this is said wittily, and in its incidental aspects with great psychological shrewdness and humour. But in one essential respect it leaves us unsatisfied. The Shelley that Monsieur Maurois presents is chivalrous, a great poet, a charming gentleman. But behind this presentation there is all the time the suspicion that he is being patronized. In Monsieur Maurois's hero there is always uncomfortably a touch of the inspired idiot. He is considered with great tenderness, and even, in spite of the irony which we are told on the cover of the book Mr Arnold Bennett found side-splitting, with affection. But it is the affection, we cannot sometimes help feeling, of a benevolent guardian for a delightful and inspired child who is not quite right in his head. We would not be unjust to Monsieur Maurois. His book is, as we say, in its kind, something very like a masterpiece, and he would very likely hotly disclaim any such intention

as we have attributed to him. But the feeling persists, nevertheless, as we read the book, and we no longer have any patience with the inspired idiot conception of Shelley in however flattering terms it may be presented.

It is a book one is glad to have read for its many adroitly intuitive strokes, and it, too, is a worthy contribution to the subject. But it is not, for example, a book we should care to give to a youngster with a developing love of literature as his first insight into the character of one of the loveliest figures in English poetry. And for this reason we say that it is rather for the informed than the uninformed; just as Mrs Campbell's book is so for the reason that its readers, unless they can organize her material as they go along from their own knowledge, will be apt to find their impressions rather nebulous, which is always discouraging to the student. But for the initiated Monsieur Maurois will provide much intellectual delight in a by no means emotionally arid atmosphere, and Mrs Campbell a noble and imaginative piece of interpretation.

Lord de Tabley[1]

John Byrne Leicester Warren, who became Lord de Tabley in 1887, was born in 1835 and died in 1895. His first volume of poems appeared in 1859, and he was publishing until the time of his death. His period was, therefore, Victorian without qualification, and no stranger coming to his work with a knowledge of English poetry could fail to recognize in it clear marks of the age of Tennyson and Browning and Morris and Swinburne and Arnold. His reputation has never been, nor is it ever likely to be, with theirs. His mastery of the muse was far too inconstant a thing to give him place in the forefront of an age, but, at his best, he was not merely a small poet imitating these greater ones with talent, but an authentic maker drawing his variable inspiration from the same sources that worked in the masters of the time to an ampler though not always a richer gathering.

In the case of the foremost men it is, when all is said, idle to dispute whether one age is greater than another in poetry. Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Tennyson, for example—you may like one better than another, and have very good reasons for your

[1] Prefixed to *Select Poems of Lord de Tabley*. (Humphrey Milford, 1924.)

liking, but that is about all there is to be said in this matter of degree. The great poets have this in common, that most of the time their work, so to speak, comes off. To follow these four instances, in spite of a great deal of nonsense that is talked about Wordsworth by people who do not read him, and, for that matter, about the other three as well, no one who really cares for poetry and patiently gives himself to the understanding of a poet like any of these four, seriously wishes any considerable volume of his work away. One is not talking of the dilettante readers in poetry, who have a perfectly legitimate taste merely for a lyric here and there, but of those others who believe that in the poetic canon of their race is to be found at once the most interesting and inspiring expression of that race's spirit. The great poet's life is always and steadfastly preoccupied with his poetry, and when a man like Milton set about writing a poem it was found more likely than not to be a good one, and, if the reader does not see it, it is, at least, as likely as not that Milton is right and he is wrong. So that, again to speak of these four, we shall find that each of them brought all the resources of a rich and powerful nature to the accomplishment of a great life's aim in poetry, and that each of them succeeded. That

Tennyson's particular kind of verse was not Pope's, nor Pope's Milton's, does not matter. In each case the great work was done and the account closed. We may call Milton a greater poet than Tennyson if we like, but Milton would laugh at us.

When, however, we come to the smaller men the case is altered. The difference between a poet like de Tabley, for example, and a poet like Tennyson is not that Tennyson reaches an excellence altogether beyond de Tabley's range, but that Tennyson does it twenty times for de Tabley's once, and that, moreover, at one sitting, as it were, Tennyson will do it consistently and de Tabley but fitfully. Inspiration remains the best word, and inspiration is common in the one case and very occasional in the other. The result is that, now to particularize, in de Tabley's *Collected Poems*, which fill five hundred closely printed pages in small type, there is an immense amount of waste tissue, and a public that can only know him through such a volume is little likely to have the patience to know him at all. This is an injustice to a poetic gift about which, when the tide was moving, there can be no question whatever. Critical opinion at the moment is rather at outs with even the Swinburnes and the Morrises and the Tennysons themselves, and possibly it may be even

less ready to reconsider the claims of a lesser light from the firmament in which these were the stars of greater magnitude. Critical opinion of the moment about things of a moment ago, however, has a way of being very soon found out, and this selection is put forward in the belief that less fashionable and more permanent judgment will be glad always to have the best of a poet who, for all his defects, could be very good indeed.

De Tabley belonged to an age in which the defects of its poetry were peculiarly troublesome. There are times when the poets, even when they are not writing at their best, do not necessarily write quite tediously. The elaborate and profuse vigour and sweetness of the Elizabethans may sometimes fall into an almost ludicrous disorder, but at their worst they still have the touch of divinity upon them. After Donne the poetry of the seventeenth century, varied as it was, has, nevertheless, for its governing characteristic, that quality which has given it the term metaphysical. That in its play of intellectual wit it disregarded the deeper things of passion is a belief obviously untenable by the witness of such names as Marvell and Vaughan and Crashaw and Herbert and Herrick, to say nothing of Milton or of a dozen other known, and many hardly known, names.

But there was in the work of all that age a certain simple fundamental quality of brain that seemed to save almost the smallest talent, no matter into what fantastic excesses it might fall, from mere dulness. One can read through volume after volume of forgotten verse books of the time and pass from admiration to every kind of reaction but boredom. There is, for example, but a poor little penn'orth of fame in the great world for the score or so of Professor Saintsbury's Caroline Poets put together, but to care for poetry is, I think, to find scarcely one page too many in the nearly two thousand of that masterly piece of devoted scholarship and taste. The seventeenth century could do silly and even false things with its wits, but the wits were always there. A poet then, in his bad moments, could betray himself into saying that the light of his dead mistress's eyes would dim all the lights of heaven, or into any other kind of extravagance, but, although he has no answer to the charge of not believing what he says, he can nearly always, at least, plead mastery of his conceit. The obvious defect in the lower levels of metaphysical poetry in the seventeenth century is a lack of emotional sincerity, but there is hardly ever a complete failure in intellectual interest. When Dryden and Reason set out to correct this

high-falutin of the mind they did much to doctor a manifest disease, but their preoccupation led them too much into making poetry commonsensical and the forgetting of such glories as

> The grave's a fine and private place
> But none I think do there embrace ;

and in the poorer work they showed that common sense in its lassitudes could be perhaps more reasonable, but certainly far duller, than the lapses of intellectual passion, and poetry very often found itself reasoned out of existence. Then came the romantic revival, standing first and foremost for a passionate emotional sincerity such as had hardly characterized English poetry before. Not even in the greatest days of the sixteenth century had the poets so poignantly and uncompromisingly laid bare the very trouble of their souls. This is why many people, to whom what are perhaps some of the rarest delights of poetry are unknown, find in the work of those men from Blake, or more probably Wordsworth, to Keats, a consolation that they do not know in the poetry of any other age. This intimate, human, troubled quality added, we know how richly, to the best of our English glories, but it, too, had the inevitable other side to its account. The emotional sincerity

knocked the conceit in both senses out of poetry as it had come from the seventeenth century and, more profitably perhaps, it put the reason of that later time in its proper place. But it had its own dangers.

It was not possible for a poet of any consequence at all, working under this new impulse, to fall into the intellectual posturings that seduced even the finer men of an earlier age in their unwary moments. Love poetry, for example, from Blake onwards has quite simply a new and deeper sincerity than had marked the volume of it for generations. But this emotional abandon, this fearless wearing of the heart upon the sleeve, while it was duly controlled by intellectual power by all the poets at their best, was too concerned with its own passion to pay any great heed, for its own sake, to the exercise of wit that had always been a chief characteristic of the metaphysicals. And this meant that, when the pressure was relaxed, a quality which had so well served the less urgent moods of poetry was no longer there for service, and the poets fell into a habit of merely repeating very deftly their own imaginative utterance at times when the imagination was not in play. The result was a serious one, and finally exemplified in the case of Swinburne, of whom it has been observed often enough that his quite inferior work

is at first glance so like his very finest as to be almost indistinguishable from it. The trouble was apparent even in the earlier stages of the new movement. It is to be found often in Byron, even Shelley is not wholly free from it, while Wordsworth and Keats had their moments of hesitation. As the so-called, and on the whole well-called, romanticism became more self-conscious with the growing of the nineteenth century, the danger became more and more pervasive, and, while it was the chief disability with which even so great a genius as that of Swinburne had to contend, it has, I think, more than anything else made for the obscuring of reputations like that of de Tabley altogether. In reading through his collected work one is continually finding passages which, while they have an almost bewildering outward resemblance to some of the best things that he wrote, are unsatisfactory, even at a first reading, and on a second assert themselves as having been written merely out of an expert habit when inspiration was asleep. It is then that the world of crumbling cliffs and pale blossoms, of which de Tabley could write so poignantly and truly when poetry was alert in him, becomes merely tiresome, and minor in the really bad sense.

And readers of the whole body of de Tabley's

work will find more particular occasions for criticism. He sometimes left loose ends of meaning in his verse, he was occasionally a little facile in the choice of a word, and he could remind us by contrast, not very often it must be allowed, how fastidious a poet like Tennyson was in the manipulation of vowel-sounds.

Having said so much, or so little, by way of reservation, we may for the rest safely leave the poems to praise themselves. The distinction of phrase which can have but one source abounds, and if his world is rather a remote and bookish one he nevertheless very often touches it to poetic reality. In minute and yet always interesting realization of the details of natural beauty he is hardly equalled by any poet of his age with the exception, perhaps, of Tennyson sometimes. And there are, moreover, occasions when he can move us by the greater things of the imagination.

In making this selection the first thing, obviously, was to give a representative showing of de Tabley's lyrical poems. This I have done to the best of my judgment. There remained the longer pieces, which presented some difficulty. Those people who cannot read poetry at all unless it is in short lyric form miss many delights, and it is, by the way, interesting to note that a good many poets of our time are again

beginning to write long poems. It is one thing for a poet to make what should be a short poem into a long one, as de Tabley often did, and quite another to have a taste for such poetic concepts only as can be put into a little space. But while the reader who shies at a long poem is, perhaps, rather more in need of a holiday of some sort than anything else, he cannot be disregarded, and he is as likely to refuse a poem of two hundred lines as one of two thousand. It so happens that what seems to me to be by far de Tabley's finest achievement is also nearly his longest one (*Orestes* is a few lines longer). And in the belief that any reader who cares for the longer "rests," to borrow a term from tennis, will turn to this as readily as to a series of shorter long pieces, I have decided to let this alone stand with the lyrics. And any reader who approaches *Philoctetes* with that leisure and submissiveness which every sustained work of art demands will be very richly rewarded. For it is here, with a subject wholly suited to elaborate treatment, that all de Tabley's powers combined to one wholly satisfying result. The neo-classical drama of the nineteenth century has many riches, but, even remembering *Atalanta*, I do not think that any is rarer than this. The form suited de Tabley's instinct exactly, and yet, far from constraining the

humanity in him, it enriched it. *Philoctetes* is not only the most moving poem that de Tabley wrote, it is, attentively read, one of the most moving long poems of the century. The description of the death of Heracles, the meditation beginning "Spirit of man, to whom these petty stings," the tenderness of the scenes with Ægle, the clear-sighted drama of the conflict between Philoctetes and Ulysses and Pyrrhus, and the magnificent speech in which the hero sums up the whole matter and takes farewell of the Lemnian peasants, are all conceived and shaped in the manner of great poetry. The characterization throughout, moreover, is exact and admirable, and through the whole work runs a thread of pure lyric beauty which is most memorable, perhaps, in the lovely figure of Pan given in the last part of the Chorus beginning, "In wonder and time-mists." With such a poem to his credit, de Tabley cannot but be secure against long neglect.

William Ernest Henley[1]

Speaking of Byron, Henley says that he "was not interested in words and phrases, but in the greater truths of destiny and emotion. His empire is over the imagination and the passions." As a critical judgment this is far less shrewd than was common with Henley, but it is suggestive in relation to his own work as a poet. Henley was a remarkable figure in the literary world of his day, moving in no scholarly seclusion, but coming out into the open field of journalism, and bearing himself always with spirit and dignity. The best of his work is a durable contribution to the finest kind of popular criticism, vivid, far from unlearned, in close touch with the ordinary and confused affairs of life. On any given subject he might have to yield at points to the specialist, but few men have covered so wide a range with so warm an understanding and with a mind so well versed in the evidence of the case. It is as a critic that he will be remembered, and it is of his critical work that there is most to be said. But he produced a good deal of creative work, and, in common with most writers who work in both kinds, he no doubt hoped that it was in this that he came to his best achievement. So that,

[1] *The Works of William Ernest Henley.* Five volumes. Macmillan, 1920-21.

although on the whole it seems likely that this side of his expression will be the first to fade, it cannot be passed by without consideration.

"He was not interested in words and phrases, but in the greater truths of destiny and emotion." This, in the last analysis, is true of Henley as a poet. He would have accepted the judgment with pride, and that he would have done so is indicative of his real weakness. When he adds that Byron's empire was over the imagination and the passions, he says more than justly can be put in for himself. Henley's poetic world was not that of passion and imagination, but that of clear-sighted morality, which was sometimes transfigured by indignation. It was in this world that he moved as a master in a great deal of his critical work. But it was a world that was, as it always must be, incomplete as an environment for rich poetic creation. In passing, it may be remarked that it merely is not true to say of Byron that in his great poetic moods, of which for all his failures he had as many as most poets, he was not interested in words and phrases. Byron knew, as in practice Henley did not, that, while it is passion and imagination that must condition the poetic faculty, the only possible consummation of that faculty comes through the most exact and disciplined ordering of words and phrases.

Henley brought to his poetry many beautiful qualities. He had real courage, he had a great-hearted tenderness, he hated Pecksniffs and impure Puritans, he was, in short, a very chivalrous man, with rare intellectual gifts. But he did not perceive that merely to be these things, while it might do anything else for you, could not make you into a poet. Every now and again this fine moral impetus in his being would move with such force as to achieve something which remains memorable and beyond the reach of any but poets of the most indisputable magic. Such pieces as *Matri Dilectissimæ* and *On the Way to Kew*, and the well-known *Out of the night that covers me*, and *Or ever the knightly years were gone*, are good things for any man to have written. Coming from the finer airs of Herrick or Marvell or Keats, our minds may not often go to Henley, but at other times we find ourselves recalling:

> Out of the night that covers me,
> Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
> I thank whatever gods may be
> For my unconquerable soul . . .

or

> Or ever the knightly years were gone
> With the old world to the grave,
> I was a King in Babylon
> And you were a Christian slave . . .

and we do so with a pleasure that we do not question. But Henley very rarely came to this excellence in his verse. The great body of it suffers from the fatal defect of having been subjected to no emotional selection, a defect which Henley very thoroughly understood when considering the work of other men. The sequence of Hospital sketches, for example, is no more than brilliant journalism. Brilliant journalism in its place is all very well; and, when a man aiming at it accomplishes it, all credit is due to him, but you cannot pass it off as poetry. These poems, one feels all the time as one reads them, are as much an accident as the occasion of Henley's being in the hospital at all. It is no case of carefully selected emotion being projected through an occasion that shall give it final form, as it seems to the poet; it is, rather, a vivid observation catching up this, that, and the other fragment of casual event and setting it down, not with imaginative but merely graphic power. The tranquillity which, as Wordsworth pointed out, is the condition in which emotion must be recollected for the creation of poetry, is precisely the condition in which the poet works with the utmost precision in that matter of words and phrases. And in most of Henley's verse there is unmistakable evidence that he was working, not in tranquillity, but in Fleet Street.

We flash across the level,
  We thunder thro' the bridges,
We bicker down the cuttings,
  We sway along the ridges.

This is not an unfair example of a prevalent quality in Henley's verse, and it does not begin to exist as poetry.

On the whole, the volume of Poems, running to nearly three hundred pages, is the one of the five forming the admirable collected edition now published that is least likely to serve Henley's memory. He was a skilled writer always and handled many verse forms with ease, but only very rarely in any of them does he come to that last continence which is style. It is interesting to note that he often writes in a manner which is to-day supposed to be extremely revolutionary, but he seems to have done it without theories, merely because it was easy.

The stalwart Ships,
The beautiful and bold adventurers !
Stationed out yonder in the isle,
The tall Policeman,
Flashing his bull's-eye, as he peers
About him in the ancient vacancy,
Tells them this way is safety—this way home.

That might pass without question in to-morrow morning's anthology, and be held to show how

unnecessary the great English metrical forms had become to progressive genius. The Henley of this kind, however, is already forgotten, but poetry will always have a secure, if modest, place for such forthright excellence as this:

Some starlit garden gray with dew,
Some chamber flushed with wine and fire,
What matters where, so I and you
Are worthy our desire?

Behind, a past that scolds and jeers
For ungirt loins and lamps unlit;
In front, the unmanageable years,
The trap upon the Pit;

Think on the shame of dreams for deeds,
The scandal of unnatural strife,
The slur upon immortal needs,
The treason done to life:

Arise! no more a living lie,
And with me quicken and control
Some memory that shall magnify
The universal Soul.

There is just a little sheaf of this quality to be garnered from Henley's poems, and he is a fortunate man who can contribute even so much to so great an inheritance.

Before passing to Henley the critic, a word must be said of the four plays that he wrote in collaboration

with Stevenson. In these there are passages of patent merit. The Stevenson of *Treasure Island* could not fail in the course of a long work to find moments of enchantment, flushed with the true broadside manner, and coloured of the best. And, given the situation right and the characters really agog, Henley had a gift of dramatic dialogue, if it was Henley's as I suspect, that could really hold the stage for five minutes at a stretch. But these things do not make drama; and, as dramas, these four plays are the merest exercises, and very poor ones at that. It is incredible that two writers of such outstanding ability could at times become so jejune. It is all very well for men of genius to have larks, but even in their larks there must be some conscience, and if there is any conscience in these plays I do not discover it. *Admiral Guinea* has scenes of the true Stevensonian glamour, but it has nothing else of the smallest dramatic truth. *Robert Macaire* is a very elaborate joke which certainly does not come off in reading any more than I can believe it to come off on the stage. *Beau Austin*, although it has perhaps the best three minutes to be found in any of the plays, is no more than Sheridan-Goldsmith pastiche. And *Deacon Brodie* succeeds only in making villainy appear more imbecile than virtue. It is in this play, too,

that we have the most hilarious examples of the abuse of soliloquy. Henley in his article on *Othello* speaks of soliloquy as "an expedient in dramatic art abominable to the play-going mind." In that essay he is inclined to accept the device because of Shakespeare's use of it, not seeing that in its proper function it may be a magnificent element in great dramatic form. But that a critic who could raise the question at all should put his name to a play in which over and over again one of the characters speaks like this,

> "Now for one of the Deacon's headaches! Rogues all, rogues all! (*Goes to clothes-press, and proceeds to change his coat.*) On with the new coat and into the new life! Down with the Deacon and up with the robber! . . . Only the stars to see me! (*Addressing the bed.*) Lie there, Deacon! sleep and be well to-morrow. As for me, I'm a man once more till morning. (*Gets out of the window.*)"

leaves one, as they say in the ring, guessing. They just won't do, and that of the plays is all there is to be said. But to leave them with the mind on that short scene in *Beau Austin*, which is perhaps the best thing to be found in them, let me quote. Austin, it may be remembered, first at Fenwick's persuasion but now from genuine impulse, is about to present his addresses to Barbara, who has been one of his conquests. The lady's young brother, Anthony, a

cornet who has neither brains nor morals, conceives it to be his duty to shoot or beat the Beau.

Barbara. Mr Austin. (*She shows Austin in, and retires.*)

Austin. You will do me the justice to acknowledge, Mr Fenwick, that I have been not long delayed by my devotion to the Graces.

Anthony. So, sir, I find you in my house——

Austin. And charmed to meet you again. It went against my conscience to separate so soon. Youth, Mr Musgrave, is to us older men a perpetual refreshment.

Anthony. You came here, sir, I suppose, upon some errand ?

Austin. My errand, Mr Musgrave, is to your fair sister. Beauty, as you know, comes before valour.

Anthony. In my own house, and about my own sister, I presume I have the right to ask for something more explicit.

Austin. The right, my dear sir, is beyond question ; but it is one, as you were going on to observe, on which no gentleman insists.

Fenwick. Anthony, my good fellow, I think we had better go.

Anthony. I have asked a question.

Austin. Which I was charmed to answer, but which, on repetition, might begin to grow distasteful.

Anthony. In my own house——

Fenwick. For God's sake, Anthony !

Austin. In your aunt's house, young gentleman, I shall be careful to refrain from criticism. I am come upon a visit to a lady : that visit I shall pay ; when you desire (if it be possible that you desire it) to resume this singular conversation, select some fitter place. Mr Fenwick, this afternoon, may I present you to his Royal Highness ?

Anthony. Why, sir, I believe you must have misconceived me. I have no wish to offend: at least at present.

Austin. Enough, sir. I was persuaded I had heard amiss. I trust we will be friends.

Fenwick. Come, Anthony, come! here is your sister.

Henley, the critic, is another matter altogether. It may sometimes be charged against him that he was superficial, and, in a way, justly. But it was a superficiality which Henley himself would have been at no pains to disown, since what is meant is not that he did not feel profoundly, but that his interests were chiefly along the highways of critical thought and creative effort, and that he was not much concerned with the remoter things of speculation nor with the rarer and more elusive kind of personality. The result is that a few readers will find Henley's pronouncement altogether shallow and ill-considered, in the case of a writer such as Landor, for example. That imperturbable spirit, casting the imagination and passion, of which Henley speaks, into a form so austere, so little conscious of the world's judgment, so sufficient to itself, seemed to so plain and blunt a mind as Henley's to be "not only inferior in kind but poverty-stricken in degree," and its creative faculty to be "limited by the reflection that its one achievement is Landor." This is to be superficial

with a vengeance; and the fortunate thing is that Henley very rarely turned his attention at all to subjects of which he had so little understanding. It is in such studies as those of Fielding, Burns, and the motley that made up Byron's world, that Henley is at his best, not only as a critic but as a writer altogether.

The outstanding quality of all Henley's work in this his best kind is a moral courage of a particular strain which we to-day, taught by a generation of writers who in this at least have learnt wisdom, may find less unusual than it was, say, in 1896, when the Burns essay was first published. Twenty-five years ago it was not difficult for a man to speak his mind about life, but, if he spoke with courage and independence, he was apt to find acceptance only among a small body of artists and thinkers. Thirty years had passed, it is true, since Swinburne sent the larger public into convulsions by *Poems and Ballads*, but even after that lapse of time such a book would have been greeted with a considerable, if not an equal, storm of protest. To-day, however much it might flutter a few hearts, *Poems and Ballads* would at least leave the moral sense of the public unshocked. And that this is so is largely due to writers, of whom Henley was by no means the least, who came out into the open and challenged not a coterie but what is

known as public opinion with the declaration that nearly all moral judgments are immoral and that what really mattered was not points of view but life.

In reading his essay on Burns, one is reminded of the teaching and practice of the truest worldly philosopher who ever lived, Christ. It is strange that so clear-sighted and lucid a moralist as the founder of Christianity should so often be advanced in support of a dulness of spirit that was the constant mark of his reproof. The people who said it against him that he consorted with publicans and sinners were at least intelligible, and stood for a definite, if bad, morality. There are a great many people in the world who do not like publicans and sinners, who think that they are better than publicans and sinners, and that some kind of outlawry is the desert of such as these. It is a most lamentable state of the human mind, but at least it asserts itself plainly, deceiving itself as to what is right but not as to what it thinks. The astonishing moralists are those who tell you that Christ consorted with publicans and sinners, as though it were a peculiar and crowning virtue in him ; that so good a man should have stooped to the company of these forlorn people seems to them to be witness of the most exemplary holiness. The thing that this kind of mind always overlooks is that Christ Himself

never thought of these people as publicans and sinners at all; and that He would have rated in no uncertain terms the spiritual ignorance that supposes that He could have thought it any kind of virtue to foregather with people whom He merely saw as men and women a little more entangled by circumstance than others, and consequently needing an even tenderer understanding.

It is this Christlike spirit that informs such essays as these of Henley on Fielding and Burns. Here was a critic who not only had his fine sense of literary excellence, but brought a real ethical standard to his appraising of it, a standard that recognized first and last that self-righteousness and morality cannot live together. The result is that in the study of Burns, for example, we have the whole of the man quite fearlessly set down, unstable, betrayed by circumstance into all sorts of follies and even worse, often enough spiritually thriftless, descending at times to the level of a mean antagonist, and, with it all, magnificent. Henley sees these defects in his hero, and is no more afraid of them than Burns himself was at pains to conceal them. He passes no moral judgment on them, since moral judgment is not his business. He merely perceives them, vividly, as part of a character, moving in its other scale to a

courage, a generosity, and a passionate charity such as have never been excelled in any human heart. And this complete Burns is for Henley life, something to contemplate with all one's understanding and humility, something so much more marvellous in itself than it can be in the testing by preconceived standards.

Henley was, in fact, a good man, and like most good men said much that is shocking to the respectable ones. Also his goodness, as usual, expressed itself often with a very natural gaiety, which nowhere shows itself to better advantage than in the brilliant character-sketches which make up the chapter called *Byron's World.* Nothing could be more spirited in its kind than the little study of Gentleman Jackson Byron's great prize-fighting friend, of whom the poet said, when some one suggested that this was no company for him to keep, " Jackson's manners are infinitely superior to those of the fellows of my college whom I meet at the high table." Jackson repaid the admiration in full, saying of Byron that nobody could be more fearless and that he showed great courage always " in coming up to the blows." It is, again, the life that takes Henley's mood, the life of an age, as he says,

dreadful no doubt ; for all its solid foundations of faith and dogma in the Church and of virtue and solvency in the State,

a fierce, drunken, gambling, "keeping," adulterous, high-living, hard-drinking, hard-hitting, brutal age. But it was Byron's; and *Don Juan* and the *Giaour* are as naturally its outcomes as *Absalom and Achitophel* is an expression of the Restoration, and *In Memoriam* a product of Victorian England.

Even when Henley makes his sympathy clear, as in the case of Byron against "Pippin," Lady Byron, he still sees all round his question.

On Jan. 8, 1816, Pippin has asked Dr Baillie, "as a friend," to tell her whether Byron is or is not mad; a week after she leaves Piccadilly Terrace for Kirkby Mallory, her father's residence; next day, "by medical advice," she writes cheerfully and affectionately to her husband; and that is all. They never met again; and the next that Duck (Byron) knew of Pippin was that she had taken his child from him, and purposed —strongly purposed—that he should never more set eyes on either of them. He never did. Byron the poet, Byron the dandy, Byron the *homme à femmes*, Byron the lover, Byron the husband and father—the little country blue-stocking was more than a match for them. Against them all she set her unaided wits, and against them all she scored; and scored so heavily that in France, and places where they know better, the name and fame of the British Female suffer for Pippin's achievement yet.

This human quality in Henley's work would, it need hardly be said, not suffice in itself to make him the critic he is. It is, rather, that, when this nature in him is stirred, his critical faculty becomes alert

also, and he discovers an authoritative sense of literary values. When, as in the case of Landor, the emotion of his subject escapes him, the expression of that emotion naturally enough seems to him to be in itself something inadequate. And all that can be said about it, as in every case of æsthetic appreciation, is that, so far as Henley's mind was concerned, the expression was inadequate. Landor remains, and Henley proves his worth elsewhere, and little harm is done. In the *Fielding* and *Burns*, on the other hand (one returns to these essays since, on the whole, they stand as the best of Henley's achievement), his personal sympathy with the life of his subject finds the nicest modulation in the analysis that he makes of the form in which that life found expression. And these papers are full not only of human understanding but of critical wisdom. We have not only warm-hearted persuasion, but a very rare insight into the processes of literary art. This, for example, of Fielding, is perfect in its discrimination and embodies a general principle that inferior criticism always overlooks :

> . . . he has ever a kindly, and at the same time a leisurely, half-laughing, half-reticent mastery of his creation, which he never permits to get out of hand ; so that he is able, on occasion, to assert, and to make us assent to, such an out-

rageous familiarity as that of the boxing of Squire Western's ears, by a person unnamed, whose sole title to credence is that, being an officer and a gentleman, he is as well acquainted with Squire Western as Squire Western's creator. That is to say, a great deal better than Sir Walter Scott and Mr Saintsbury. Sir Walter thought that Mr Western ought to have retaliated; Mr Saintsbury (speaking, he says, as a Tory) agrees, and seems to think this inimitable and daring touch the Novelist's "one slip." For myself, I am, like Mr Dobson, of Mr Fielding's party; for the reason that he knew his Western, and that his Western, if we are to accept him at all, must be accepted on his terms.

And so it is always when he is in touch with his subject. He may sometimes be deceived by a manner as to what lies behind. To the example of Landor might be added that of Philip Sidney, in whom Henley could see only affectation and conceit, and in whom he only permitted himself vaguely to suspect that there was a heart beating under "the buckram and broidery and velvet," so that the poet of *Astrophel and Stella* remained for him but a "brilliant amorist." In that gallant and formal carriage, expressive of an age when with the grand manner went grand manners, Henley could see little more than a strut; and so he could make no acquaintance with one of the truest of the English love poets. But, when he does understand, he nearly always does it with great thoroughness; and in his best work he

never fails to test even his warmest sympathy with a writer's temper by a clear apprehension of principles governing the creative energy.

On the whole, Henley stands for a quite definite thing in modern English letters. He was not a great imaginative writer, and, though he had a good style, it was not a notably distinguished one, such as, shall we say, that of Mr Edmund Gosse. Nor, on the other hand, was he a great and original moralist, moving in lonely ways of speculation. But he did perhaps as much as any writer of his time to enlighten the ever-vexed problem of the relation of morality to art. Nothing more justly provokes suspicion in the critical mind than the art which seems to include in its purpose what the Americans call " moral uplift." The first sign of the critical mind, indeed, is a very proper pride in the conviction that, for better or worse, it would like to solve its own spiritual problems for itself. Such minds go to art because in that atmosphere, more perhaps than in any other, they are braced precisely for these solutions ; and they rightly resent any presumption on the part of the artist that he is being sought, not for this purpose, but as a sort of spiritual ready reckoner. The critical mind is, therefore, and properly, never so touchy as when it suspects that it is being got at

by the artist; and, indeed, it is a perfectly sound æsthetic instinct, since, when the artist is thinking about instructing the world instead of understanding it, he is inevitably up Queer Street.

But to understand this is by no means the same thing as to suppose that the artist ought not to concern himself with moral issues or that he is transgressing if he plainly shows himself to be impressed by, to call it by its simplest name, goodness; and the critical mind is continually getting itself confused about this issue. It is one thing for an artist to say, "Be good, sweet maid," and quite another thing for him to create a Cordelia, and make it perfectly clear to us that he thinks Cordelia admirable. Every acute critic sees the defect in "Be good, sweet maid," but a great many critics who should know better become defensive (or offensive, as the case may be) about the Cordelias of art. Every critic would, of course, disown any such misjudgment about the actual Cordelia of Lear, but let, say, Mr Walpole create a heroine on his own plane in whom goodness in its common sense is the chief characteristic, and all sorts of startled intellectuals will cry out upon him for a sentimentalist.

Now, Henley, as has been said already, was a good man, and he loved goodness. He was under no

illusions as to what goodness really was, and, as was shown by his acrimonious treatment of some of Stevenson's whitewashers, he neither hoped nor wanted to find paragons of virtue among men. He was perfectly aware, too, that in this world of expediency the values of vice and virtue are continually falsified, so that he knew, for example, that in the sum Burns was a much better man than any of his detractors. But, when all is said, the fact remains that Henley did immensely cherish the ordinary decent things of charity and tolerance and fortitude and devotion. And, while he was the last man in the world to tell his fellows that they ought to foster these things, he was eager in his praises whenever he found them. Had he been a great creative artist, his world would have been alive with this best kind of virtue, and it would have been his to survive the common charge of sentimentalizing life. As he was not a great creative artist, this instinct in him found its fullest expression in criticism; and it does so in such a way as perhaps might persuade even the most intellectual critic that, in an artist, to be moral is not necessarily to be damned.

The Poetry of Alice Meynell[1]

I

When Alice Meynell died in 1922 she was said, I believe, to be over seventy years of age. Anybody less like seventy it would be difficult to imagine. I have been honoured with her acquaintance—I think I might almost say friendship, certainly her goodwill—for some twelve years. It was not easy, perhaps, to think of Alice Meynell as a girl or a young woman, but it was impossible to associate her with anything of old age. Witty, generous, of the simplest and most tender humanity, there was also in her some austerity, not of personality, but of spirit, that suggested the women of Greek tragedy. I have never known anyone so ageless. Youth, maturity, and fullness of years were here strangely at one. It was in no chance moment of vision that she wrote, when she was a little over twenty, *A Letter from a Girl to her own Old Age*. At twenty she was as old as she would ever be; at her death nothing of young freshness or wonder had gone from her. In her home, humorously intent upon the succession of family cares and gossip, she was yet the seer always. To be with her was to be at ease in the presence of

[1] Read to the Royal Society of Literature from the Chair of Poetry.

a great lady. Let the talk be of what it might, she was never withdrawn or indifferent; but behind the gayest of her occasions there was a quietness of mood that gave precision and authority to everything she said. Here was a perfect example of the original as distinguished from the eccentric mind. She never startled you, but she never failed to delight your attention.

II

The custom, at present in disfavour, of printing in a poet's books good opinions of his work has been much abused. But, observed with decency, it has its uses. We may want no judgment between our own and the poetry, but we may as well not be too nice about it. It depends upon whose judgment it is. We may not need Shelley to tell us that Keats was a good poet, but we are glad that Shelley does tell us that all the same. Alice Meynell will never be with Herrick and Burns and Tennyson for everybody's reading. Her subtlety and the rareness of her manner will rather set her in public estimation with Donne and Marvell and the best of Landor. Her artistic aims were such that popular assessment is of little moment, but because of this the views of the elect among her contemporaries take on an added interest, so that there is nothing unbecoming

in the page at the end of her poems that tells us what Rossetti and Francis Thompson and Coventry Patmore and Meredith had to say about her. And these and other commanding voices are emphatic in agreement that here was not merely a woman writer of talent to be courteously received, but a poet of the very finest essence. Rossetti knew her sonnet, *Renouncement*, by heart, repeating it with high praise to the chosen; Ruskin found in her first book the finest things he had seen in modern verse; Francis Thompson foresaw the certain gathering of the best judgment of coming times in homage of her genius; Coventry Patmore, unqualified in admiration for her prose, found himself, by rather fine-spun argument, confined to saying that she was as near being a poet among the immortals as any woman could hope to be. Patmore was a poet whose best work will take a far higher place yet than it has done, but I fancy that his House of the Angels was just a touch Persian in character, and nothing is so upsetting to the intellectual Shahs of this world as the Alice Meynells. George Meredith, bringing to her a devotion from genius to genius, exquisitely revealed in the newly-published volume of his letters, said of her verse, "It has the swallow's wing, and challenges none," and again, "of your little collection [the first

privately printed issue of a selection from the *Later Poems* of 1896] all passes into my blood, except *Parentage*." We need not go further. By right of one slender book she was admitted, when she was no older than Keats at his death, to equal fellowship with the masters of her age.

III

The first volume was *Preludes*, by A. C. Thompson, published by Henry S. King & Co. in 1875, with illustrations by the poet's sister, Elizabeth Thompson, afterwards Lady Butler, the painter of *The Roll Call*. The book contained thirty-seven poems, and it shows the poet already in the full maturity of her powers. It is, indeed, difficult to think of any English poet who in early youth has published a book in which the fulfilment of design is so complete. Other poets in their first efforts may have had a more universal, perhaps a more passionate aim, but none has subdued his intention, whatever it might be, to a more perfect mastery. The workmanship of the book is exact and unfailing from the first page to the last, and although in the poems that were to come later there was no falling away from the exquisite standard set in the beginning, there could be no development of an art that seemed to have had no

probation days. It was with Alice Meynell's poetry as with her personality—first and last were one, so that we might recall the seventeenth-century epitaph:

> Lo, huddled here together lie
> Green youth, grey age, white infancy.

Preludes at once displays the characteristics that have become familiar to the poet's admirers. Its general mood is one of affectionate resignation, with neither bitterness nor even regret. Throughout there is a spiritual humility that reminds us how little of true pride there is in the common self-assertions. There is here a surrender of soul, but it is consciously a surrender of something so rare and lovely that it can be made only to a supremely imagined purity. The poet is humble only because of the divine company in which she moves. This accounts for the fact that one note for which we commonly look in the poetry of youth, that of revolt, is entirely absent from *Preludes*. Anger and protest and denunciation, those ardours of rebellion that stir most generous young minds as they first realize the tyrannies of a stupid world, were nothing to this poet, who, however she might look upon the vulgar errors of society, could not conceive of them as food for the imagination. Not that she was careless of

these errors on the one hand, or that her poetry was mere placidity on the other—nothing could be wider off the mark than to suppose either of these things. She took always a very practical, and even argumentative, interest in the thousand ways in which man teases and confounds himself in the ordering of his communities, but these were matters for the tea-table, not for the seclusions of art. Such conflicts as these implied were, indeed, crude and journalistic beside those finer and more decisive conflicts that were moving always in her poetry. Scolding is well enough, necessary at least, but you may scold here to-day and there to-morrow, and it's pretty much all one; but to possess your soul is a much more intricate and ponderable business, and there must be no wasted strokes since the stake now to be won is for a lifetime, or eternity perhaps. Insensitive ears deafened by the tumult of nations catch nothing of such campaigns as went forward in Alice Meynell's poetry, but it is none the less by such as these that the liberation of man must come.

Looking within this general mood, we may detect certain qualities of mind that were peculiarly Alice Meynell's own. First, perhaps, of these is an amazing gift for capturing with a phrase the most elusive turns of thought, for arresting the cloud shadows of

emotions as they pass over the mind and giving them solid intellectual form. This was a faculty that she shared with her beloved seventeenth-century lyrists, with Donne and Crashaw and Vaughan, but in actual deftness of its exercise I think she excelled them all. Such poets as those, perhaps, burnt more fiercely than she, and were even more curious in spiritual skill, but none of them gave difficult thought so lucid a simplicity of statement. It is this that we find in:

THE YOUNG NEOPHYTE

Who knows what days I answer for to-day?
  Giving the bud I give the flower. I bow
  This yet unfaded and a faded brow;
Bending these knees and feeble knees, I pray.

Thoughts yet unripe in me I bend one way,
  Give one repose to pain I know not now,
  One check to joy that comes, I guess not how.
I dedicate my fields when Spring is grey.

O rash! (I smile) to pledge my hidden wheat.
  I fold to-day at altars far apart
Hands trembling with what toils? In their retreat

  I seal my love to-be, my folded art.
I light the tapers at my head and feet,
  And lay the crucifix on this silent heart.

And even more remarkably in:

THE VISITING SEA

As the inhastening tide doth roll,
Home from the deep, along the whole
  Wide shining strand, and floods the caves,
  —Your love come filling with happy waves
The open sea-shore of my soul.

But inland from the seaward spaces,
None knows, not even you, the places
  Brimmed, at your coming, out of sight,
  —The little solitudes of delight
This tide constrains in dim embraces.

You see the happy shore, wave-rimmed,
But know not of the quiet dimmed
  Rivers your coming floods and fills,
  The little pools 'mid happier hills,
My silent rivulets, over-brimmed.

What, I have secrets from you? Yes.
But, visiting Sea, your love doth press
  And reach in further than you know,
  And fills all these; and, when you go,
There's loneliness in loneliness.

And, as a final example, the reader should turn to the longer *Letter from a Girl to her own Old Age*.

Together with this power of saying exactly what we might have supposed could not have been said even nebulously, a power constant in Alice Meynell's poetry, is the less rare but not less admirable power of sending tides of imaginative suggestion through a plain statement, and employed by this poet with

most beautiful assurance, nowhere more strikingly than in *Parted*, and particularly in the last stanza :

> He is not banished, for the showers
> Yet wake this green warm earth of ours.
> How can the summer but be sweet ?
> I shall not have him at my feet,
> And yet my feet are on the flowers.

The intellectual ingenuity of which I have been speaking is, more than most material, under the necessity of proving itself in poetry, of coming into complete artistic life. More commonplace content matter—the mere declaration of love, let us say, or the telling of the seasons, or the thought of death's certainty—may fail, because of insufficient emotional pressure, to quicken into poetry, but although the failure may be complete, we can pass by without resentment. But there are pretensions in subtle and remote metaphysical inquiry that cannot escape so easily if they do not justify themselves in poetry. The failure in such a case becomes openly ridiculous, and even offensive. The conceits of seventeenth-century poetry, lovely when they were fortunate, as they so often were, could easily enough become merely silly, or, at their worst, revolting. The love lyric could become a deliberate exercise in insincerity, and the religious lyric could sometimes smell like a

slaughter-house. Alice Meynell's poetry is in this matter as unfailingly certain as in everything else that it undertook. The conception may be as intellectually arbitrary as the devices of the schoolmen, but it flowers always in her verse into pure and inevitable truth. What, in its abstraction, could be more fantastic than this, *To the Beloved*, for example, and yet what could be more tenderly convincing ?

TO THE BELOVED

Oh, not more subtly silence strays
  Amongst the winds, between the voices,
Mingling alike with pensive lays,
  And with the music that rejoices,
Than thou art present in my days.

My silence, life returns to thee
  In all the pauses of her breath.
Hush back to rest the melody
  That out of thee awakeneth ;
And thou, wake ever, wake for me !

Thou art like silence all unvexed,
  Though wild words part my soul from thee.
Thou art like silence unperplexed,
  A secret and a mystery
Between one footfall and the next.

Most dear pause in a mellow lay !
  Thou art inwoven with every air.
With thee the wildest tempests play,
  And snatches of thee everywhere
Make little heavens throughout the day.

Darkness and solitude shine, for me.
For life's fair outward part are rife
The silver noises; let them be.
It is the very soul of life
Listens for thee, listens for thee.

O pause between the sobs of cares;
O thought within all thought that is;
Trance between laughters unawares:
Thou art the shape of melodies,
And thou the ecstasy of prayers!

Alice Meynell, writing but little, never wrote insignificantly, and each of her few poems presents its own attractive problems; but already in her first book certain themes are recurrent, and certain distinctions of style assert themselves. The communion of a mind with its other self, sometimes moving in its own recesses, sometimes in the person of a friend or lover, is one of her favourite preoccupations. It is to be found in *The Young Neophyte*, *The Visiting Sea*, and the *Girl's Letter*, and more than once elsewhere, as in:

THE SPRING TO THE SUMMER
(*The Poet Sings to her Poet*)

O Poet of the time to be,
My conqueror, I began for thee.
Enter into thy poet's pain,
And take the riches of the rain,
And make the perfect year for me.

Thou unto whom my lyre shall fall,
Whene'er thou comest, hear my call.
Oh, keep the promise of my lays,
Take thou the parable of my days;
I trust thee with the aim of all.

And if thy thoughts unfold from me,
Know that I too have hints of thee,
Dim hopes that come across my mind
In the rare days of warmer wind,
And tones of summer in the sea.

And I have set thy paths, I guide
Thy blossoms on the wild hillside.
And I, thy bygone poet, share
The flowers that throng thy feet where'er
I led thy feet before I died.

This sense of an intimacy, a mystical understanding, that makes many things—perhaps, in the philosophic conclusion of the matter, all things—one, is, together with the instinct for surrender in service to some divine wisdom that alone can command service from a spirit so rare, the prevailing mood communicated by *Preludes*, and indeed by the later poems as well. "A poet of one mood in all my lays," she says, of herself we must suppose, and shapes of the world are subjected, in all their variety, to the influence of this mood, which is rightly the way of poetry.

The countries change, but not the west-wind days
Which are my songs.

It is only the trivial mind that will confuse this constancy of character with monotony. What is said does not lose its charm or pungency, or even its surprise, because we can recognize always the tones of the voice. The waters of *Preludes* flow, it is true, narrowly between rather high banks, but they are deep and fresh always. The poet was keeping the time, she tells us, sacred

> To all the miles and miles of unsprung wheat,
> And to the Spring waiting beyond the portal,
> And to the future of my own young art.

But the future was more than suggested in the present. The mood was grown, the art practised and sure. Already the manner had that curious fastidiousness that was to mark it always, and to mark it apart. It was a manner rarely compounded, reticent, and yet precise and uncompromising in statement, shunning every kind of emphasis, and yet of the most lucid and ringing accent, shy of rich colours in diction, and yet making hard and prosaic phrases flush and glow with unexpected light.

> The Lover Urges the Better Thrift
> My Fair, no beauty of thine will last
> Save in my love's eternity.
> Thy smiles, that light thee fitfully,
> Are lost for ever—their moment past—
> Except the few thou givest to me.

Thy sweet words vanish day by day,
As all breath of mortality;
Thy laughter, done, must cease to be,
And all thy dear tones pass away,
Except the few that sing to me.

Hide them within my heart, oh, hide
All thou art loth should go from thee.
Be kinder to thyself and me.
My cupful from this river's tide
Shall never reach the long sad sea.

Lyric poetry could hardly be simpler than that, and at the same time it could hardly be subtler, or even more complex. It is an art of which we may well speak, as she of her own *Daisy*:

Thou little veil for so great mystery.

It never fails; it can hardly be said ever to falter even. Just once, in—

Was earth cold or sunny, Sweet,
At the coming of your feet?

there is a moment of uneasiness, but it passes, and is alone in the book. For a young poet so proudly of tradition, and so spiritually akin to one age at least of English verse, there is a surprising absence of apparent influences upon the actual phrasing of the poems. In the line about flowers—

When they blossom from thy dust—

there is a direct reminiscence of Shirley, but I do not think *Preludes* has another echo of the kind.

IV

Poems appeared in 1896, twenty-one years after *Preludes*, but it was only a reprint of the earlier book with the addition of seven new poems, among them *Renouncement*, the sonnet of Rossetti's admiration, and the *Song of Derivations*, to which further reference will be made. In the same year appeared a small privately printed pamphlet, *Other Poems*, containing ten pieces that in turn formed more than half the slender *Later Poems* of 1902. Then followed another silence, this time of fifteen years, to be broken in 1917 by *A Father of Women and Other Poems*, in which the poet added no more than sixteen short poems to her collected work, now amounting to some eighty poems, covering a working period of over forty years. Finally, in *Last Poems*, published posthumously, there is the last and relatively large addition of another thirty-one poems, and the whole work is now available in a single definitive volume. In this volume, small in size as the product of a long life, made up almost entirely of short lyrics, and yet very close and exacting in substance, there is hardly a stanza or even a line that the severest

critical judgment would wish away. And yet of the work after 1875 there is little that is essential to be said that might not as well have been suggested by the first volume. The delight never fails, but it is not the less eagerly welcomed because it is not a new delight. It is the measure of Alice Meynell's excellence as a poet that after we know a dozen of her poems we feel that there is no possible further chance of novelty from her, and yet that there will never be a failure of complete and arresting originality. The more familiar we become with her work the more do we want it to go on being just what it is without change. In the later books the poetic life of *Preludes* is modified here and emphasized there, but no more, and we would not have it otherwise. On the whole there is, perhaps, a little more to question—that is to say, we are pulled up once in fifty pages now instead of once in seventy as before. Every now and again, very rarely, we wonder whether the intellectual deftness and the balanced mastery of language are not playing half a trick with the poet. One of her most celebrated lyrics is the

CRADLE-SONG AT TWILIGHT

The child not yet is lulled to rest.
  Too young a nurse, the slender Night
So laxly holds him to her breast
  That throbs with flight.

He plays with her, and will not sleep.
For other playfellows she sighs;
An unmaternal fondness keep
Her alien eyes.

It is idle to praise a thing so exquisitely done; the mastery is plain at once. And yet is there in its nature something not false but capricious, capricious in the presence of truth? Has the delight in saying a thing so beautifully for once led the poet from imagination to make-believe? Does the night do any of these things—how is she too young a nurse? One sees the fancy, but is it more than that—is there in the lyric the inescapable argument that is at the roots of all fine poetry, at the roots nearly always of Alice Meynell's? Again, this from *The Rainy Summer*:

No scents may pause within the garden-fold;
The rifled flowers are cold as ocean-shells;
Bees, humming in the storm, carry their cold
Wild honey to cold cells.

How perfectly done—what aristocracy of writing—but are the cells cold? I'm not sure, but I somehow do not think they are, and poetry in this sense should not be feigning.[1] The same occasional tendency shows itself in one or two other poems, where the

[1] The case is different when the poet is genuinely mistaken as to his facts.

thought, instead of being subtle and suggestive as it is in most of this poet's work, becomes odd, wilful.

"Why Wilt Thou Chide?"

Why wilt thou chide,
Who hast attained to be denied?
Oh learn, above
All price is my refusal, Love.
My sacred Nay
Was never cheapened by the way.
Thy single sorrow crowns thee lord
Of an unpurchasable word.

O strong, O pure!
As Yea makes happier loves secure,
I vow thee this
Unique rejection of a kiss.
I guard for thee
This jealous sad monopoly.
I seal this honour thine; none dare
Hope for a part in thy despair.

I, for one, who adore Alice Meynell's work and think of it as among the very fine flowers of the English genius, do not much care for the poet who wrote that poem—I somehow do not think that in strict terms of the imagination she really meant it. Meredith, in liking the first instalment of the later poem, made a reservation, as I mentioned, in the case of *Parentage*. This is the poem:

Ah, no, not these!
These, who were childless, are not they who gave
So many dead unto the journeying wave,
The helpless nurselings of the cradling seas;
Not they who doomed by infallible decrees
Unnumbered man to the innumerable grave.

But those who slay
Are fathers. Theirs are armies. Death is theirs;
The death of innocences and despairs;
The dying of the golden and the grey.
The sentence, when these speak it, has no Nay.
And she who slays is she who bears, who bears.

Writing of this to the poet, Meredith says: "Appealing to our common mother for an explanation of her favoured daughter's mood when writing it, I had this from my Fount of Wisdom: 'She has the gift of splitting a hair into a million threads, and seeing the various hues in shade, and she can still be tempted to play upon her faculty, and on a wet afternoon she may consent to a musical diversion in pessimistic pathos. It is not the "soul of her soul."' So speaks Nature to me."

We may leave it at that, and with it all questioning whatsoever. Among the later poems are a few pieces that are more definitely occasional in character than anything in the first book, *November Blue*, *A Dead Harvest*, and *The Watershed*, for example, but they are all beautifully done, and earn their place

truly enough. Here and there is a touch of more explicit humour than we had found before, as in:

THE LADY POVERTY

The Lady Poverty was fair:
But she has lost her looks of late,
With change of times and change of air.
Ah slattern! she neglects her hair,
Her gown, her shoes; she keeps no state
As once when her pure feet were bare.

Or—almost worse, if worse can be—
She scolds in parlours, dusts and trims,
Watches and counts. Oh, is this she
Whom Francis met, whose step was free,
Who with Obedience carolled hymns,
In Umbria walked with Chastity?

Where is her ladyhood? Not here,
Not among modern kinds of men;
But in the stony fields, where clear
Through the thin trees the skies appear,
In delicate spare soil and fen,
And slender landscape and austere.

We find sometimes, too, a more objective mood asserting itself, directed now upon problems of literary criticism, producing the specialized kind of poetry that William Watson has done so well, and in which Alice Meynell is certainly his equal, and again upon problems and aspects of modern civilization, as in the lovely and rather unexpected *Threshing*

Machine. But for the most part the poetry of the later years is with that of the earlier, both in its concerns and in its methods. We have the same slow gracious movement of the verse, the same limpidity of phrase, the same fixed and piercing vision.

THE SHEPHERDESS

She walks—the lady of my delight—
  A shepherdess of sheep.
Her flocks are thoughts. She keeps them white;
  She guards them from the steep;
She feeds them on the fragrant height,
  And folds them in for sleep.

She roams maternal hills and bright,
  Dark valleys safe and deep.
Into that tender breast at night
  The chastest stars may peep.
She walks—the lady of my delight—
  A shepherdess of sheep.

She holds her little thoughts in sight,
  Though gay they run and leap.
She is so circumspect and right;
  She has her soul to keep.
She walks—the lady of my delight—
  A shepherdess of sheep.

The line "She is so circumspect and right" might almost stand in a phrase as the key to Alice Meynell's style. It is the style always of a poet who possessed her soul and her imagination, one who was in the great line of English lyrists, and yet stamping personality

upon every word she wrote. As we read her work we realize that the independence is complete, and yet the loyalty that exalts it is splendid. Original genius never paid more perfect tribute to its ancestry that here in :

A Song of Derivations

I come from nothing ; but from where
Come the undying thoughts I bear ?
  Down, through long links of death and birth,
  From the past poets of the earth.
My immortality is there.

I am like the blossom of an hour.
But long, long vanished sun and shower
  Awoke my breath i' the young world's air.
  I track the past back everywhere
Through seed and flower and seed and flower.

Or I am like a stream that flows
Full of the cold springs that arose
  In morning lands, in distant hills ;
  And down the plain my channel fills
With melting of forgotten snows.

Voices, I have not heard, possessed
My own fresh songs ; my thoughts are blessed
  With relics of the far unknown.
  And mixed with memories not my own
The sweet streams throng into my breast.

Before this life began to be,
The happy songs that wake in me
  Woke long ago and far apart.
  Heavily on this little heart
Presses this immortality.

Mr Masefield's "Reynard" and "Right Royal"

Upon nothing in us, perhaps, do the changes of the years mark themselves more clearly than upon our affection for poetry. In early youth we go to the poets for that glowing aura of romantic sensibility which they most commonly achieve when they themselves are young. It is then that most surely we feel the spell of Byron, of the more ethereal quality in Shelley, of such lesser masters as Poe and Thomas Moore. Shelley, it need not be said, can supply our later needs as well, and superbly, but in much of his work he is with these others as satisfying the desire of youth for that cloudier beauty where clear definition stands for little beside the mere rush of enchantment. As we come to middle-age our demand is more and more for the concrete image, the hard outline, the intellectual clarity that is behind all larger vision, be it never so radiant. It is then that we realize the true lyric mastery of such men as Marvell, and Donne, and Wordsworth of the shorter poems, and Blake, and Landor. What happens in old age I cannot say, since with that Time waits upon me yet.

But there is one kind of poetry which, if we care for it at all, we care for always. In its nature it may

conceivably be said that this is not of the very rarest attar, that it never quite touches the supreme wonder of phrase that is the last delight of poetry. But for all that it seems to me that it has more uniformly than any other poetic kind what we mean by greatness. It is the poetry that takes easily into its processes great vistas of humanity with their background. The highest masters, such as Shakespeare, can by habit encompass this end and at the same time touch their work at every point with the rarer precision of which I have spoken. Others in their creative impetus passing humanity under rapid review may inform their work less frequently with the high lights of distinction, and yet by the very liberality and sweep of their perceptions come to greatness. The most notable example of this kind is Chaucer, and with him William Morris may fairly claim rank.

And now in *Reynard the Fox* and *Right Royal* Mr Masefield has added this distinction to many that were already his. His lyrics, at their best, have a tenderness that is not surpassed in contemporary poetry. In his previous narrative poems he has been able to bring this tenderness to longer work that has always seemed to me to be essentially lyric in character. The most affecting quality in *The Everlasting Mercy* and *The Daffodil Fields* and the rest of

them is that same tenderness relating Mr Masefield's own personality to the people of whom, and the events of which, he is writing. We do not quarrel with this; we are grateful for it, as we are always when beauty is the end. But with *Reynard the Fox* there was a change. It would not be difficult to select a passage here and there for the isolated beauty which is common in the other poems, but here it would be to miss the presiding excellence of the work. In this poem and the later *Right Royal* a motley of life passes with a gusto that is new in Mr Masefield's work and brings it far more nearly than it has been before into the region of Chaucer's profound and moving comedy.

It is a habit of mind with most people who think about poetry to give to the narrative a relatively humble rank in the art, and it is a habit which Mr Masefield is constantly challenging by his work nowadays. Here is a poet, whose lyric and tragic notes are as sure as any of his time, turning repeatedly from these to the call of romantic narrative. It often happens that this peculiar method has a certain narcotic quality which, although it is invaluable in the scheme of things, does generally mean a slackening of imagination. It accounts for the difference between a great man like Dumas and a greater

man like Shakespeare. Dumas, probably, has loyaller readers than any other writer in our modern literature. That is to say, people who read Dumas at all return to him over and over again. But the return is nearly always made from a more or less tired or distracted mood. Then it is that the magnificent narrative power and the slightly unreal ethical world of Dumas combine to give ease and delight, but it is that very unreality which in our more vigorous moments is apt to make him less stimulating than Shakespeare with his uncompromising truth. The fact would seem to be that with the writers to whom the narrative scheme is a matter of first importance there is the tendency always to accept a spiritual convention which is not sincerely their own creation at all, but one which it is easy to apprehend and difficult to dispute, and we, when our own spirit is not quite at concert-pitch, are not only willing to do our part of the acceptance, but even grateful for the lowering of tension. But because this often happens in narrative it does not follow that it is necessary to the form, and Mr Masefield is with Chaucer and Morris in reminding us of this. He, too, has splendidly the gift of telling a story; that the most prejudiced of his critics could hardly dispute. His gifts as a dramatist are unquestionable, but in the technique of drama he

has always been apt to fail his creations in some apparently trivial but really vital movement. In his narrative poems he makes no such mistakes.

Mr Masefield's manner is now prefectly assured. This is not to say that he is quite at all moments master of his style, but rather that the work which he is now doing could not conceivably be mistaken for that of anybody else. That he writes extremely well is not the whole point, though the ease to which he has come after long and patient discipline is in itself a much more admirable thing than may commonly be realized, and Mr Masefield is curiously careless in the opportunities which he gives to detraction. It may be that he is indifferent, but if so, it is an indifference which a poet does well to avoid. No preoccupation with the movement of his work can excuse Mr Masefield, or any writer, for saying of his hero, at a moment which not only is intended to be but actually is charged with feeling, that—

> As he left the room for the Saddling Paddock
> He looked as white as the flesh of haddock,

which is not alone in its ineptitude. These lapses in a writer of the first distinction are, however, Mr Masefield's peculiar prerogative, and at this time of day his readers must make up their minds to accept them

as part of the contract, and that once done they do not really amount to very much when the reckoning is made. In his narrative poems, especially, it might be that something of his rare impetuousness would be lost to Mr Masefield if his mood in writing were one of more exact perfection. And although that is obviously a very dangerous admission to make, it would seem to be fully justified in this case by the experience of what is now a long sequence of remarkable achievements in narrative poetry. Allowing for all blemishes, the manner here is the manner of mastery, and through five centuries the masters have shown that with all their faults they know better than they can be taught.

In so far as *Reynard* is a narrative, its hero is the fox. The fine body of folk who come to the meet are used admirably by the poet for the purpose of setting before us one deftly outlined character after another—character here always of comedy strain—but beyond a formal connection here and there with the main scheme of the poem they might have been used much to the same end and in much the same way as a crowd in a country market-place, or, say, a village church congregation. This is no defect; the Ghost Heath Run is as fair a device as another for assembling the poet's figures—as fair as the Canter-

bury Pilgrimage. Mr Masefield justifies his method by giving us an exhilarating group of men and women, all rich in quality, and compounded of type and personality in the way which the best comic art always contrives. But apart from this scheme in the poem, which might have been as well served by making the chronicle begin and end with the meet as by carrying it through the long run by Ghost Heath, there is a further strain of pure narrative effect, and this concerns itself wholly with the mortal struggle and final escape of the small red animal that gives the poem its name. The story is conducted with great spirit and variety, and is a notable addition to the rare successes in animal poetry. Reynard takes his country with fine dramatic effect, and he becomes very much an object of our concern as we read. He is not sentimentalized by the poet, and in his own vagabond kind he crawls at last into his earth, exhausted but safe, a not unworthy fellow of Mr Ralph Hodgson's Bull. And as he crosses woods and pasture and rivers, Mr Masefield finds again an opportunity of drawing the English landscape that he loves so well and sees so vividly. There is no contemporary poetry that has in it more deeply the poignancy of the earth than Mr Masefield's, and in this poem he, perhaps, excels his own tenderness. We think little or nothing of the

crowded folk behind as the fox makes his lonely yet perilous way, with death but at a field's distance, across one of those midland counties that have their own very special and intimate beauty. It is, perhaps, an unconsidered effect in Mr Masefield's poem that while our interest in the hunting's end never fails, the fox yet seems to be a creature apart from the excited pursuit, moving through a world of natural loveliness that is wholly undisturbed by the little tumult of the scarlet-coated field. Ghost Heath cares nothing for the run. But unconsidered as it may be, the effect is none the less one of very subtle art, being also the one reminiscence in the poem of Mr Masefield's rare tragic gift.

The story of *Right Royal*, the horse who wins the Chasers' Cup, is unerring in its construction from start to finish. It is in every way a worthy companion to *Reynard*, and will be read with sheer imaginative delight by thousands of people who ordinarily are not much concerned with poetry at all. But, over and above this, the poem is a poem. Surrounding the story is a spiritual life which is the genuine shaping of experience, truly Mr Masefield's own experience, and that, it might almost be said that only, is what poetry must be. Here we have to surrender to the poet and accept his experience, in this case the radical English

fervour for sport, as being significant, but we are not asked to enter into a conspiracy with the poet to accept an experience which is not his but merely one of convenience. To find work of which this can be said, and of which at the same time we know that all sorts and conditions of men will share in the delight, is a matter for uncommon gratitude. In doing it no poet of Mr Masefield's generation is serving his art more truly.

Although it may be said that *Reynard the Fox* and *Right Royal* have not in the detail of their workmanship quite uniformly that cameo-like sharpness that is the surest guarantee of permanence in a long poem as it is in a lyric (in all literary forms, in fact, as in Mr Hardy's novels, for example) there is a general distinction in the work that can only be attained by an excellence in the parts composing the whole. If the texture is not of the very rarest quality, it is always compact and sound, and the cumulative impression is one both of simplicity and of richness. The poems are likely to serve Mr Masefield's reputation well. The history of this reputation is not an uncommon one, and affords an interesting comment upon public opinion. Fifteen years ago Mr Masefield's poems caught the ear of a few careful listeners only. It was then a mark of alert

culture (following the careful listeners) to praise him. The poet's audience suddenly became a large one with the widening of his own poetic interests and the introduction into his work of certain popular (but by no means worthless) as apart from purely poetic qualities. There was general applause, and alert culture became shy at first, then a little angry, and finally in disdain left Mr Masefield for the discovery of Mr X— and Mr Y—, who in a day or two will likewise be disowned. Alert culture, the truth is, is but the assertive voice from year to year of the very latest literary *débutant*; we have, I suppose, all been there ourselves.

Mr Masefield has happily been untouched by the coldness of this disapproval, being more concerned in his work, and consoling himself doubtless with the affection of thousands of readers who are simple enough to think that Tennyson and Wordsworth and Milton were great poets. And his poetry has moved in steady and admirable development, until now in his maturity the wheel is coming full circle. Already alert culture is praising him again, just as it has been announcing to an obtuse world the discovery of that new lyric poet, Mr Thomas Hardy. You are apt to look a little foolish if you continue in disparagement of a man who can write poems like

Reynard the Fox. So that until the next turn of chance Mr Masefield is secure of his greater and his lesser public. And he possesses himself surely enough to make his more durable fame, when chance shall have played all her tricks, a matter of but little doubt.

Edwin Arlington Robinson[1]

When recently Mr Edwin Arlington Robinson reached his fiftieth birthday, he was publicly greeted by nearly every poet of any distinction in America as the master of them all. Enlightened criticism in that country has for long recognized him as having more clearly the qualities of permanence, perhaps, than any American now writing. Even a poet so unlike Mr Robinson himself in aim and method as Miss Amy Lowell devotes a long chapter in her book on *Tendencies in American Poetry* to the work of one whose distinction she finely acknowledges. A new book by Mr Robinson has in America, among the austere critics at least, as much importance, shall we say, as a new book by Mr Yeats has to those in this country. And yet, with all this, there is, I suppose, no poet of anything like his excellence in America who is there so little known as more than a name, while in this country at present he can hardly be said even to be a name.[2] In reviewing a recently issued anthology of contemporary American verse, at the length of two columns, the *Times Literary Supplement* passed him by without reference, while

[1] Read to the Royal Society of Literature from the Chair of Poetry.

[2] I leave these words as they were written, though happily they could be modified to-day.

the *Nation and Athenæum*, with even less excuse, since in that case it could not be merely an oversight, spoke of him only to dismiss him in two or three lines as being duller than Wordsworth at his dullest. A third writer, in the *Saturday Review*, can only say that his " compositions are to a strange degree " like those of Miss Amy Lowell and Mr Sandburg. It would be as intelligent to say that the poems of Edgar Allan Poe are like those of Walt Whitman. Ignorance is all very well, and even rather charming in its place, but when it begins to commit absurdities of this kind something ought to be done about it. A critic who discusses contemporary American poetry and thinks that Mr Robinson is either not worth mentioning at all or only to be mentioned with contempt, or that his poetry is like Mr Sandburg's, simply does not know his business, and ought to change it for another. He might, for example, just as well treat Mr Robert Bridges so, in talking of contemporary English poetry. American literature to-day is far fuller of interest than many people in this country think. Most of our young novelists would willingly allow at least half a dozen of their fellows in America to be among the most important contributors to their art in this generation, and every poet here who knows anything about it would

say as much on his side. Take them or leave them, you cannot dismiss as insignificant such poets as Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, Vachel Lindsay, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, and, as it seems to me, more decisively even than these, Edwin Arlington Robinson. Again, in literary criticism the Americans are doing a great deal of notable work. It is true that they are also doing much that does not seem to matter, being, as it were, a re-statement in a local idiom of what are now commonplaces of older cultures. The country is rich in critics who escape being dull without the sacrifice of erudition. At the same time it is in criticism, perhaps, more than in any other form of literary activity, that some peculiarly American defects most clearly show themselves. No modern writing more commonly indulges the fallacy that the only escape from academic tameness is to be found in a smart impertinence which is fondly supposed to be intellectual candour. A critic like Mr Heywood Broun can always distinguish between being entertaining and being tiresomely bright, but some of his fellows can make wit an incomparable tedium. It is such as these that have from time to time spoken of Mr Robinson much in the manner of the *Nation* reviewer here. But while we writers have much to learn from the best of our American friends in matters

of freshness and enterprise, this particular kind of example is one that should rather warn than instruct us.

Mr Robinson has throughout his career taken as little pains to attract public attention to himself in any way, except by the excellence of his work, as, say, has Thomas Hardy. He has never been a figure for the paragraphists, and he has shown that it is possible for one of the most distinguished men of his time to hide himself very successfully in the glare of New York. His life and manner have just that incisive reticence that is so characteristic of his poetry. For some years this most sensitive poet was in his fortunes, as they say, down and out. One feels that it would hardly have occurred to him to take any steps to mend matters, and it is an amusing and not uninstructive comment upon American life that it was Theodore Roosevelt who found him and insisted on giving him an official post, seeing to it that the authorities should recognize that Mr Robinson's first business was poetry. There was a gallantry in this, and one is glad of it, but it meant less to Mr Robinson, one is sure, than it would even to most poets in the same circumstances. His tender, ironical, fearless genius has in it a peculiar stability that would surely make him less dependent on surroundings than are more mercurial creators. To direct a tranquillity of contemplation upon the whirl-

pools of life is in a rare degree the function of his art, and, for all his vivid reaction to that life, even at its most violent, we feel that the tranquillity is one that nothing could shake. Mr Robinson was acclaimed as leader by the American poets of his time, but of the qualities which differentiate most of their work as a group from poetry in general there is scarcely a trace to be found in Mr Robinson's verse. A poet has a perfect right to his own choice of material, and nothing is so critically inept as to blame him for it, whatever it may be. The only question is whether he has transfigured it into the reality of art. It may be that the material does not interest us, but that is our own affair and not the poet's, and when we say that it does not interest us it generally means that we are less interested in poetry than in our own preoccupations and points of view. It is the merest futility to argue with a poet about his conclusions, and it is only worth while to analyse the content matter of his work when we happen to find that this work does, because of its poetic virtue, move us profoundly. It is then, and not till then, that the material of his art is of any concern to us. It is just as with our affections for people. Out of his love the lover finds an ever-quickening interest in all that the beloved is, in points of character and pro-

cesses of the mind. But it is love that begets this interest, and not the interest which begets love; love being, as it were, the life of human contact, as the poetic essence is to the whole body of a poet's work. So in poetry we may care very much for a poet whose philosophic and moral temper is not at all in general sympathy with our own, and, on the other hand, we may find no profit in another who flatters us exactly in these things. For example, there is a great deal in the material of Shelley's poetry which, for its own sake, means little or nothing to me, and yet his poetry stirs me as much, perhaps, as any in the world; while on strictly reasonable grounds I should agree with almost everything that Miss Willcox says in her verse, and yet it does not begin to stir me at all. Consequently, I am really interested in the content matter of Shelley's poetry even when I do not agree with his point of view, while I am not at all interested in that of Miss Willcox even when I do. I see the virtue in the content matter of such poets as Mr Sandburg, because in some measure I am moved by their art to begin with, but it is no disparagement to them to say that Mr Robinson's content matter seems to be more important, which simply means that Mr Robinson's art does, for me at least, make a more certain appeal.

The difference, then, between Mr Robinson's preoccupation and that of nearly all the so-called modern school who have acclaimed him is that for them all the clamorous accidents of our civilization have become an absorbing and sometimes a tragic experience in themselves, as though the very noise had startled them into a conviction that it was in itself a fundamental and significant thing. The roar and the savagery and the reek which are a part of Chicago, for example, seem to provoke Mr Sandburg into a kind of determination to answer them back in their own terms, and he does it with courage and mastery. This does not mean that he has not other perceptions as well, but this perception does loom very largely in his poetic mood. And so it is with poets like Mr Vachel Lindsay and, in a more rustic manner, Mr Lee Masters and Mr Frost, and, allowing for all her varied and traditional scholarship, Miss Amy Lowell. But for Mr Robinson these things hardly exist at all. When they do he only turns to them as an occasional poet, momentarily disturbed from his habitual concerns as he might be by a street accident. His preoccupation is the spirit of man, not assailed and tortured by that movement of life which we call civilization, but seen, as it were, detached from this influence and labouring in all

the ironies and aspirations of its own nature. Mr Robinson is in the true Greek tradition in this, that whereas most of his fellow-countrymen who are poets see man beset by society, which is circumstance, he sees man beset by his own character, which is fate.

Again, unlike most of his American contemporaries, Mr Robinson in his verse structure is almost always traditional. With hardly an exception throughout his collected poems he uses the normal blank verse line, the four- or six- or eight-lined rhymed stanza, generally with four or five beats to the line, and masters these with his own rhythmic personality, as practically every great poet in the English language has done these five hundred years. At the risk of repeating what I have said before elsewhere, the commonest error of a certain school of critics and poets is that they continually confuse the functions and virtues of metre with those of rhythm. Metrical forms are slowly evolved in the cumulative consciousness of a race, and their acceptance by a succession of poets is governed by their peculiar fitness to the genius of the language. No individual mind at this time of day, for example, could possibly discover beyond all argument that, whereas the five-foot iambic line is a perfect vehicle for the expression in

English of a very wide range of poetic feeling, the Alexandrine is, broadly speaking, of no use at all for the English language. That is to say, we could drop the Alexandrine from our poetry entirely without any likely loss at all, whereas the exclusion of our normal blank verse line would be an extremely heavy loss to every future poet. But we are to-day aware of this, not through sudden revelation to our own understanding, but because of an instinct bred out of five centuries of poetic practice. And the poet who thinks that by submitting himself, not slavishly but as a true inheritor, to this condition of his art he is in some way stunting his own personality, confuses self-respect with ego-mania, and is fit, not for Parnassus, but for Bedlam. The lucid poet knows that within those metrical forms there is infinite scope for the impress of his own rhythmic sense, and he knows that in this collaboration between tradition and his invention is the only sure hope of any poetic completeness. Mr Robinson is with the masters of his art in recognizing this without question, almost, it would seem, without conscious choice. And of his metrical manner no more need be said than that.

The rhythmic life itself within his verse is very subtly governed by his whole poetic character. In

reading poetry one becomes more and more aware of a curious distinction between two groups, in one or the other of which almost every poet can be placed. It is clearly a mistake to suggest that great poetry can be turned into prose without destruction of its meaning, but it is true that some great poets, even in their most impassioned work, have what may be called a prose quality, while others have not. There are two kinds of magic in poetry, that of precision and that of suggestion, and preference for one above the other may remain a matter of individual taste. In the first group I should place such poets as Milton, Matthew Arnold, Wordsworth and Mr Robinson, while in the second such as Coleridge, the Keats of *La Belle Dame*, Edgar Allan Poe, and Mr de la Mare. And for some of us that quality of precision results in a still lucidity which is more poignant and magical than any glamorous world of whispers and shadows. However this may be, Mr Robinson's poetry is from beginning to end informed always by this quality in a very marked degree, and it is a quality that gives his rhythm its unmistakable character. His music is never languorous, or slow, or trembling, or remote. It is rather always perfectly clear in its modulation, simple in its accent, and yet as full always of delightful surprise as that of any of the most delicate weavers

of suggestion. His is rather a tragic world, generally a deeply tragic world. He celebrates it not in the haunted cadences of sorceresses round the fire but with the clear melodic ease of a well-voiced countryman at the inn.

Flammonde is an admirable example of Mr Robinson's manner, and it is very suggestive both as to the quality and the interests of his mind. Over and over again in this poem are instances of that exquisite clarity of which I have been speaking:

> What small satanic sort of kink
> Was in his brain? What broken link
> Withheld him from the destinies
> That came so near to being his?

and again,

> Nor need we now, since he knew best,
> Nourish an ethical unrest. . . .

Such things as these seem to me to be consummate in their mastery, touching the farthest difficulties of poetic writing. The modern English poet who does the same kind of thing most surely is, I think, Mrs Meynell. She, too, knows the virtue of such exact, uncompromising words. It is when a poet writes with this measured certainty rather than with the vehemence of frustration that we know that emotion

is moving most deeply. The false critics of poetry are constantly confusing this steady incandescence with the cold and passionless, looking rather for crude colours and protestations and wistful stammerings as the signs of poetry. But the wise reader knows that directly he comes to this kind of chastity in writing, when the virtues of the finest prose are informed with the magic of poetry, he is in the regions of the rarest poetic discovery. Suddenly to find such lines as these just quoted and repeated is to be at the heart of beauty and pathos, and Mr Robinson with great art constantly moves from such lines to a yet barer simplicity, and with

> And women, young and old, were fond
> Of looking at the man Flammonde . . .

and

> We've each a darkening hill to climb ;
> And this is why, from time to time
> In Tilbury Town, we look beyond
> Horizons for the man Flammonde.

brings us very near to tears. I know, indeed, of hardly any poet in the language who more surely or constantly communicates a sense of tragic pity. There can be no greater praise, and yet I do not think it is too great, than to say that passages like those quoted, and they are common in Mr Robinson's work,

remind us of the supreme close of *Samson Agonistes*.

> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise or blame, nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble.

It is not within the scope of this study to make a close analysis of the whole of Mr Robinson's work in all its many kinds. His *Collected Poems* fill six hundred pages and range from the smallest lyric of occasion to narrative poems of three thousand lines in length. Nor, for that matter, is it ever very profitable to explain in detail what a poet is writing about, since what he says can be said only in the way that he says it. One can but point out his general methods and note the tendencies of his moods. *Flammonde* represents very fairly a common way with Mr Robinson. The man who is kept from " the destinies which come so near to being his " is constantly in his thought, and there is a large group of poems in which he figures, in great psychological variety but always with the same poignancy. " My dreams have all come true for other men," says one of his derelict heroes, and the poet sees character bewildered and mired no less among the romantic glories of Arthur's court than in the slums of New York. With this tragic sense we find nearly always

in his work an ironic touch which makes it not only moving but always interesting, or, as Rossetti had it, amusing. Since Mr Robinson is a poet, it is needless to say that in this irony there is no touch of cynicism, though severity is not unknown to it. He can not only give character single statement, as in the Flammonde poem, but he can show it very finely in conflict, as in *Llewellyn and the Tree*, a poem of perfect dramatic proportions, with its deft conclusion:

> He may be near us, dreaming yet
> Of unrepented rouge and coral;
> Or in a grave without a name
> May be as far off as a moral.

"As far off as a moral." That is one of Mr Robinson's charming touches of irony. Perhaps the silliest affectation of a rather assertive school of contemporary criticism is that poetry and moral conviction cannot live together, or that, at least, if a poet has moral convictions the only decent thing he can do is to be quiet about them. One has only to say over to oneself Shakespeare, Milton, Burns, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Browning to reduce the whole theory to nonsense, but it is nevertheless one very commonly advanced in these days. A particular critic may have no interest in a particular poet's

moral substance, but that has nothing to do with the question. No poet asks the critic's suffrage in this matter, nor is it in any way his purpose to impose his own moral conviction upon anybody else. Wordsworth's moral conviction may or may not be of importance to me, but it is of immense importance to him, and that is what matters in the economy of the world. Without it his poetry simply would not have existed ; it is, in fact, the very soil out of which the flowers of that poetry spring. It may be true that the soil here and there runs a little thin, but nobody reasonably looks for uniform perfection even in a great poet. The point is that the critics who accuse a poet like Wordsworth of a too prevalent desire to improve the occasion are mere virtuosi playing with the great passions of the world that Wordsworth so fully lived. It is the old story ; it does not matter at all what the particular nature of the poet's moral conclusions may be. No moral worlds could be more dissimilar than those of, say, Wordsworth and Shelley and Swinburne, but in each case the poetry of these men was just a condition of his own moral world informed by genius and nothing else whatever. And every poet of importance from Æschylus down to Mr Robinson has fearlessly recognized this principle in his art. Mr Robinson wants

to instruct no one; but moral purpose and pity burn passionately, though with a quiet flame, throughout his work, and when a critic tells us that he finds him duller than Wordsworth at his dullest we have a perfect epitome of nearly all that is false in the aforesaid school of criticism.

The Poetry of Francis Ledwidge[1]

Francis Ledwidge, coming from Irish peasant stock, for some time living so that his publisher could advertise him as "The Scavenger Poet," joined the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in 1914, and was killed in Flanders in 1917, at the age of twenty-five, leaving two books of poems, and the material for a third which has since been published.

To these volumes Lord Dunsany has contributed intimate little prefatory notes, full of generous delight in a new poet's work. His preference for individual poems is a matter over which we may differ pleasantly enough; it is no small distinction for any man to have known the shy footfall of genius when it came, and Lord Dunsany has proved his critical sense in the best of all ways. It is with nothing but respect and gratitude for his charming and courageous god-parentage that we question his opinion at a crucial point in his very brief analysis of Ledwidge's poetic quality. He says, in introducing the poet's first book:

> I have looked for a poet amongst the Irish peasants because it seemed to me that almost only among them was in daily use a diction worthy of poetry, as well as an imagination capable of dealing with the great and simple things that are

[1] *Songs of the Fields* (1916); *Songs of Peace* (1917); *Last Songs* (1918). Three vols., with introductions by Lord Dunsany.

a poet's wares. Their thoughts are in the spring-time, and all their metaphors fresh. . . .

Ledwidge, he concludes, is the poet for whom he has been looking. We believe that underlying this passage is a misconception in general æsthetics, and that the definition arising from it demonstrably fails to fit the particular case of Ledwidge. In its profounder issues poetry depends little enough on the artificial—but not therefore negligible or worthless—culture that a man absorbs from the prosperous condition of his descent and his own early advantages of society and education. In the process, however, by which a poet comes to the final realization of his faculty such things are of considerable moment, and the nature of their influence is not such as is commonly supposed. Every poet, if he is to do work of any consequence at all, has to find himself through tradition; that is an unescapable condition of his function. Native wood-notes wild are no more of the most natural lyrist's untutored sounding than is the bird's ecstasy unaware of the generations, and almost invariably the personal ease of the young poet's song depends upon the degree of intimacy with the poetic resources of his tongue that he has acquired unconsciously by natural inheritance and early association. The most mannered

early verse, after the merely imitative period, is nearly always the work of poets with no assimilated knowledge of literature in their blood who have suddenly become conscious of examples that others have never lacked. One cannot help contrasting with Ledwidge the case of poets such as Mr Robert Graves and Mr Siegfried Sassoon, who set out upon their poetic careers at twenty, having already made in the progress of boyhood the sound adjustment to tradition, the necessity of which some of us had to waste several precious years of early manhood in laboriously perceiving and meeting. It is they, and not Ledwidge, who fetch their first proper tunes to their own easy impulses, assured of a technical behaviour that they need not strain at. There are, no doubt, earlier poems by Ledwidge than any that Lord Dunsany has published, but we may take it that in *Songs of the Fields* we have the first work of any personal character. And from this through the three volumes nothing is more notable in the poet's external habit than his certain progress from a manner heavy with self-conscious discovery of English poetry, through which his genius struggles often but brokenly to its own gesture, to clear deliverance from this tardy constraint, when he writes of his own simple and lovely world with no touch of untutored circum-

stance, but in the sweetest and most delicate tradition of English song.

Whether these poems are printed in chronological order we are not told, though the dates given in the last volume suggest that they are, and they are certainly so arranged as to show direct continuity of development. From the beginning there are signs of imaginative waywardness and of the suddenness of inspired thought that are unmistakable in their meaning. On the first page we find, "And the sweet blackbird in the rainbow sings"; and the presence of poetry is clear. But for long the smallest flight is marred by the mannered or insincere turn. The wind "like a swan dies singing," the dusk is velvet, the moon is a pilgrim, the harebells ring. Not yet, either, can he use such a word as "sublime" in "Ah! then the poet's dreams are most sublime," with any of the sureness that belongs to mastery. In his anxiety to do well by the demands of poetry for significant figures, moreover, he falls at first often into triviality and sometimes into real gaucherie. The "woodbine *lassoing* the thorn" is as unimpressive as the crane watching the troutlets' circles grow "as a smoker does his rings," and there is the same kind of poverty in "Autumn's crayon." Worse than these, as indicating some deeper defect of judg-

ment, from which, however, he wholly recovered, are such phrases as "fog of blossom," and "facefuls of your smiles." Another uncertainty in his earliest work comes from the occasional confusion—by no means unknown in poets of far greater experience and power—of scientific knowledge with vision. It would be interesting to know something of Ledwidge's adventures in learning; one imagines that his eager mind, something after boyhood, went through a phase of delight in mere contact with formal instruction, and that for a little while to know a fact was as exciting as to realize a thing. Out of such a mood surely comes the little town's "*octagon* spire toned smoothly down," which is strangely what poetry is not; and yet he could turn his learning sometimes in his verse to right account, as in, "When will was all the Delphi I would heed."

These are indications in particular of the general directions in which the first book is weak. Against them, even among the poems that fail in any complete effect, are to be set many tender and exact felicities, such as:

> And like an apron full of jewels
> The dewy cobweb swings. . . .

Or again:

> And in dark furrows of the night there tills
> A jewelled plough. . . .

Or, speaking of a poet:

> And round his verse the hungry lapwing grieves.

Professor de Selincourt recently reminded us of the wonder of two simple words in Milton's

> Which cost Ceres *all that* pain. . . .

There is a kindred beauty in this young Irishman's

> Then when the summer evenings fall serene,
> Unto the country dance his songs repair,
> And you may meet *some* maids with angel mien,
> Bright eyes and twilight hair.

To these may be added:

> And when the sunny rain drips from the edge
> Of midday wind, *and meadows lean one way* . . .

and the thought of April who

> Will have a cuckoo on her either shoulder . . .

and the slight, surprising mastery of

> I watch an apple-spray
> Beckon across a wall as if it knew
> I wait the calling of the orchard maid.

It is interesting to note that of the half-dozen or so poems in *Songs of the Fields* that have a legendary or historical source, all but one have little to distinguish them from the exercises of a true poet,

while that one is, unexpectedly, the most completely successful poem in the volume. The explanation is, probably, that the set subject-matter at once subdued the natural play of his genius, and, by keeping him intent on an external responsibility, held him from the excesses to which he was yet liable in his freer meditation. And so, when with such a theme his faculty did for once break through restraint and soar above the occasion, as it did in *The Wife of Llew*, he wrote what seems to me, if the arrangement of the book is significant, to be his first delicate masterpiece:

> They took the violet and the meadow-sweet
> To form her pretty face, and for her feet
> They built a mound of daisies on a wing,
> And for her voice they made a linnet sing
> In the wide poppy blowing for her mouth.
> And over all they chanted twenty hours.
> And Llew came singing from the azure south
> And bore away his wife of birds and flowers.

It is fragile, a thing partly of the fancy ; it has not the vivid and intimate contact with reality that was to make some of the later songs of such fine bearing in their little compass, but it is a lovely device, surely done. There are three other poems in this first volume that may be chosen for their rounded achievement, as distinct from occasional excellence : *The Coming Poet* (though the first stanza is hardly good

enough for the second), *Evening in February*, and *Growing Old*, with its perfect conclusion :

> Across a bed of bells the river flows,
> And roses dawn, but not for us ; we want
> The new thing ever as the old thing grows
> Spectral and weary on the hills we haunt.
> And that is why we feast, and that is why
> We're growing odd and old, my heart and I.

Songs of the Fields is a book full of expectancy. The reader leaves it in the assurance of an impulse that will overcome all its difficulties, and break presently from hesitant and alloyed grace into sure and bright authority. The development came, beautifully, and, in a few happy moments of complete liberation, to the height of promise, but it was won with tragic difficulty in the preoccupation into which the poet was called, and in which he was finally to perish. *Songs of Peace*, issued after an interval of a year, and presumably containing work most of which was written in that time, opens with Ledwidge's longest poem, *A Dream of Artemis*. Here and there are slack lines, as " Such music fills me with a joy half pain," and the poem generally, although it has dignity, and although its *Hymn to Zeus* has lovely touches in it, is unimportant in the body of the poet's work. From a word in Lord

Dunsany's preface, however, we gather it to be of earlier composition than the rest of the book. The short lyric, *A Little Boy in the Morning*, has a first verse of lucky gaiety that is hardly maintained in the second. Then follows a series of poems under divisional headings, *In Barracks*, *In Camp*, *At Sea*, *In Serbia*, and so on, in which for many pages disappointment seems to be the destined end of our hopes. Still we have the frequent witness that here is a poet of the true endowment :

> The skylark in the rosebush of the dawn,

—a beautiful image that he uses twice, by the way—or the right sort of particularity in :

> Dew water on the grass,
> A fox upon the stile . . .

but still the full and easy realization of the manifest gift is deferred. The earlier blemishes are seldom present—it is but once and again we come across words of such relaxed imagination as " filigree," and yet the positive advance in creation waits. Then, towards the end of the book, we come to a poem headed *Thomas M'Donagh*, of which Lord Dunsany says, " Rather than attribute curious sympathies to this brave young Irish soldier, I would ask his readers to consider the irresistible attraction that a lost cause

has for almost any Irishman." The political equation in the matter does not concern us here, nor does it concern anybody in the presence of what happens to be Ledwidge's first encompassing of profound lyric mastery. Its occasion was, certainly enough, an accident; we know that these enfranchisements of the spirit are dependent upon no outward circumstance. Here is the poem:

He shall not hear the bittern cry
  In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds
  Above the wailing of the rain.

Nor shall he know when loud March blows
  Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,
Blowing to flame the golden cup
  Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor,
  And pastures poor with greedy weeds,
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn
  Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

The first stanza seems to me to be flawless, the second to have one slightly insensitive phrase—"fanfare shrill"—and an epithet in the last line that, while it is exactly appropriate, is somehow not perfectly used, while in the last stanza the precisely significant "greedy weeds" falls doubtfully on the

ear. For the rest, it is a poem of that limpid austerity that comes only from minds slowly but irresistibly disciplined to truth. Its inspiration is a quality that, while it is immeasurably precious to those who can perceive it, escapes the sense of many altogether. It has mystery, but it is the mystery of clear modulation and simple confidence, not that other mystery of half-whispered reticence and the veiled image; it is at once lucid and subtle, and it has the repose of vision, not of fortunate dream; it is of the noon, not of the dusk. Preferences in these matters are temperamental; there will always be many more to divine the spirit of wonder in the depths and distances of a Corot than in the flat perspicuousness of a Cotman, but for some the very ecstasy of revelation is touched by the Norwich drawing-master. So it is with poetry; the shy song, the shadow-haunted, with its ghostly quavers and little reluctances, makes its own gentle and enchanted appeal, but for some of us it often leaves half-created what in intention was but to be half-said. For us, the power of presenting, in hard and definite outline, experience perfectly adjusted by the imagination to figures of reality, with imagery that never denies its relation to some intellectual concept and design by claiming sufficiency for itself, is the hardly won and richest

gift of poetry. It was to this power that Ledwidge's development moved, in the poem just quoted, where he comes first to its unquestionable exercise. Like all fine verse, it needs to be read not in silence only, but also aloud.

From this point in *Songs of the Fields* we have two other poems, *The Wedding Morning* and *September*, of, perhaps, as rare a quality, and two others, *Thro' Bogac Ban* and *The Blackbirds*, of almost equal attainment, and in *Last Songs* at least half the poems are written with assured lyric maturity and lightness. *Autumn*, *Pan*, *To One Who Comes Now and Then*, and *Had I a Golden Pound*, are, it may be, the most striking of them. This is the last-named :

Had I a golden pound to spend,
  My love would mend and sew no more.
And I would buy her a little quern
  Easy to turn on the kitchen floor.

And for her windows curtains white,
  With birds in flight and flowers in bloom,
To face with pride the road to town,
  And mellow down her sunlit room.

And with the silver change we'd prove
  The truth of Love to life's own end,
With hearts the years could but embolden,
  Had I a golden pound to spend.

The book, which, as a whole, is decidedly the poet's best, has little of the war in it, and only once, in the charming *Soliloquy*, is there a martial note, and there it is sounded in a slightly conventional contrast with a gayer mood. His songs, here as in the beginning, are almost always of the quiet fields of Ireland or the quiet fields of the mind, and his tenderness for this tranquil and fertile world was not, as it has so often and less significantly been, the fruit of reaction against the squalor and confusion of war. He went to France bearing it in his heart, and there it prospered, in witness of his natural vocation, until he was killed.

Such a gift as that of a few lovely lyrics was at no time greatly esteemed by the world, and in these days, although love of beauty is by no means rare, indifference often smoulders into open hostility. And yet the world's esteem is so little a thing and beauty so durable, asking but a little companionship. Ledwidge's poems gain nothing from that other gift that he so devotedly gave, that we so forlornly receive. That the world should spend a poet so may be the tragic necessity of the time's folly, and the poet himself least of all would make dispute about it. But nothing justifies the world's pitiable pretence that in making the supreme sacrifice the poet exalts

and sanctifies his art; nothing is meaner than the appropriation to our own hearts of the glory of the soldier's death—a glory which is his alone. It is ours to keep him in remembrance, to realize, it may be, the courage that was his; but the continual insistence not that his devotion is splendid, but that it is upon us that his devotion may splendidly bestow itself, is contemptible. Ledwidge died heroically: that I can reflect with deep reverence; that he died for me I can remember only in forlorn desolation and silence. But his poetry exults me, while not so his death. And it is well for us to keep our minds fixed on this plain fact, that when he died a poet was not transfigured, but killed, and his poetry not magnified, but blasted in its first flowering. People, says Lord Dunsany in a letter, "seemed to think that one poet dead more or less didn't much matter." So many people, indeed, find in a poet's untimely death an emotional excitement, which if they were honest with themselves they would have to confess was far from being wholly unhappy, that is more vivid than anything else that they ever get from poetry at all, and if the untimely death is also a noble one, yet more punctual is this facile compassion for the arts. But to those who know what poetry is, the untimely death of a man like Ledwidge is nothing but calamity.

There are indeed poets who, dying young, with what seems measureless promise unrealized, we may yet feel to have so far outrun the processes of nature in early achievement that the vital spirit could no longer support the strain. Keats was such a one; the constructional perfection of the *Odes* alone bears witness to an intellectual disciplining of genius so far beyond the normal reach of what was but boyhood, that nature had to sink exhausted under the pressure, and there was, perhaps, little of unhappy accident in the stroke that was but an inevitable squaring of the account. In other words, I cannot but think, however profitless such surmise may be, that if Keats had lived to mature manhood, the poetry of his first youth would have been of far less grandeur than it is. But nothing of this can be said of Ledwidge. His development was slow, and, while it was certain enough, it moved with no remarkable concentration nor to fierce purposes. He was cultivating his glowing lyrical gift with tranquil deliberation to exquisite ends, and nothing is clearer than that when he died he had but begun to do his work. His future was plainly marked. Already he had come through the distractions of imitation to a style at once delightedly personal and in the deepest and richest traditions of English lyric poetry. It is,

perhaps, strange that his Irish nature should have sung its homeland in a manner that is, it seems to me, not Irish at all, but so it is. He was coming, in a few songs had come, to mastery in the succession of Wyatt and Herrick and Marvell and the lyrical Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold, and such later poets as Mr Davies and Mr Hodgson. And across his gentle maturing, with no providence of beauty won beyond the common achievement of poets thus young, death came violently, with no healing, against nature. His own September of the year came in his life before spring had well gone:

Still are the meadowlands, and still
  Ripens the upland corn,
And over the brown gradual hill
  The moon has dipped a horn.

The voices of the dear unknown,
  With silent hearts now call,
My rose of youth is overblown
  And trembles to the fall.

My song forsakes me like the birds
  That leave the rain and grey,
I hear the music of the words
  My lute can never say.

Johnson and Boswell

HARDLY anything in English letters has been more universally praised than the fidelity of Boswell's portraiture in his great biography. It is a commonplace after we have read the book to say that we know Johnson as though we had sat talking to him, can visualise his very gait and gesture, and know his manner of life with an intimacy unusual even between personal friends. And yet the impression that we get from Boswell, exact as it is, cannot, when we come to think of it, but be an imperfect one. What Boswell saw he reported with genius, and his book stands safely enough at the head of its kind. But, although Johnson as an artist was not gifted with the highest imaginative powers, he was truly an artist, profoundly concerned with all the difficult tissue of his own experience and considering it with rare intellectual vigour. And such an artist is of necessity very largely a lonely man, living apart through a great deal of his time in meditation, his mind discovering itself almost in secrecy, or stimulated not by easy contact with many others, but by some deep fusion with one or two. It is of this side of Johnson, which must have been there, that we get little suggestion in Boswell's vivid pages. The strain of melancholy which Johnson brought into his social life was no doubt in a way a

reflection of those lonely contemplations, but that is the most we hear of it. The shrewd, bludgeoning, fearless, witty fellow, entertaining the best minds of his age, forcing acknowledgment from authority, sternly jealous for his great craft, and keeping his friend Boswell jumping from paroxysms of apology to really tender gratitude, is drawn in the biography with a skill that has been the wonder of criticism ever since it was done. But as we read these pages the other Johnson of whom Boswell was hardly aware except with a certain professional acumen keeps a shadowy presence in the background, where was, we are sure, some friend or confidant who knew Johnson as Boswell could not know him, some one or two persons of whom if he had known the truth the poor biographer would have been distractedly jealous. There are many figures in the book who might fill the part, if we add to the picture of them which is given through Boswell's knowledge, some strokes which he, happily for his own peace, could not perceive. Mrs Thrale perhaps—it is clear from the published correspondence that here was a relationship altogether beyond the biographer's reach—or Goldsmith, whose appearance in the *Life* is, we are sure, a mere formality beside the truth, if we could have known it, when he and Johnson spent hours together of which we have

no record, or, it is strange to reflect, even someone of whom Boswell had never heard. The pathos and understanding which so freely marks the character of Johnson as Boswell presents it to us must have had their sources in emotional experience of which there is in the biography the merest suggestion rather than revelation.

This of course is no complaint against Boswell. No man could have done the work he set out to do more admirably, but he now stands in no need of praise. It is merely that Johnson, who is chiefly known to the world not for his own achievement but through Boswell's presentation of a certain side of his achievement, has in the course of years come rather to stand in the national mind as one who was above all "a clubbable man." It is we, the readers, and not Boswell, who are to blame for this. But there is the fact, and it is a fame which Johnson would little have coveted. It is true that we acknowledge him to be clubbable by virtue not of little and easy qualities of good fellowship that mark any fifth-rate pot-house, but because of rare intellectual distinction in the best company. Nevertheless, this shining in good company is a small thing when set beside the greater imaginative achievement which, after all, was Johnson's life-long hope and endeavour. The great

heights of poetry were beyond his reach, but in the school of good sense, which in romantic times is apt to be treated with less respect than is its due, Johnson came to very eminent distinction, and little as he may be read nowadays he can never be read without renewed admiration. And that distinction, hardly less than the distinction of a Blake or a Wordsworth, cannot be come to without many voyages, even the rumour of which would almost inevitably escape a mind such as Boswell's, so unadventurous for all its alertness. Even the phrases that enlivened those conversations at The Club, of which Boswell has preserved for us so rich a treasure, while seeming at first sight to be just the sort of thing that the accomplished man of the world might bring off when stimulated by such an environment, suddenly remind us of a profound life lived beyond the range of all clubs and Boswells. "However, I loved Campbell," says Johnson one day; "he was a solid orthodox man, he had a reverence for religion. Though defective in practice, he was religious in principle, and he did nothing greatly wrong that I have heard." Though defective in practice, he was religious in principle. That is the wisdom of the lonely seer, cutting right up against all the dirty moralising of the world with its cowardly pretence that if you do not always

practise what you preach you are damned. Again he writes to Boswell, "You always seem to call for tenderness. Know then, that in the first month of the present year I very highly esteem and very cordially love you. I hope to tell you this at the beginning of every year as long as we live; and why should we trouble ourselves to tell or hear it oftener?" That must have seemed a very severe condition for affection to lay down to so anxious a spirit as Boswell's, and, indeed, stability itself might grow restive under the terms. But we must remember that Johnson had a very sincere devotion for his friend, a devotion which stood many trials on both sides, and then we realize that in what at first sight seems to be almost an impatient word against importunity, there is in truth a spiritual sureness of the kind which again is not picked up in the intercourse even of the most enlightened coterie. In this simple phrase Johnson demands more perhaps than most men, even men of fine character, would either wish to or be justified in doing in their most trusted relationships, but the demand itself comes from something majestic in Johnson and not from indifference.

No reader of Boswell can fail to find on almost every page some word or another that points to this aspect in Johnson's character, which the biographer

for all his fidelity has inevitably obscured. But we also find everywhere evidence of another Johnson, whom Boswell understood perfectly and who was truly the product of the remarkable society which he so much loved and in which he moved with so much authority. Political prejudice and personal favour, even religious persuasion, which were created in his mind not by the poet's brooding, but by the give and take of daily affairs and controversy, were likely at any time to provoke him into an emphasis that belonged wholly to the Johnson of Boswell's understanding. Boswell, for example, is reading aloud from some rationalist writer who says, " I was born in the wilds of Christianity, and the briars and thorns still hang about me." Whereupon, we are told, Johnson cannot help laughing at the ridiculous image, and is yet very angry at the fellow's impiety. " However," he exclaims, " the Reviewers will make him hang himself." Boswell, in spite of his protestations, was always ready to take his judgment from Johnson, or, indeed, mostly incapable of doing anything else, but Johnson at least must have known that the image is a very apt and striking one. But as the occasion was Good Friday, and Johnson's true devoutness uppermost in his mind, he was not prepared to see the most obvious merit linked with what

he called impiety. And it is this side of Johnson, so fully presented in the *Life*, that has made him in the popular mind a rather grimmer figure than is justified if we look a little beyond Boswell's vision. His pontifical manner was real enough no doubt, but even when it is most in evidence, there are touches all the time to remind us of a very gentle and wistful spirit that was perhaps after all the truest thing about him.

Wilde's "The Importance of being Earnest"

It may sound wilful to say of a man who more perhaps than any other of his generation attacked the bourgeoisie with great if rather fantastic courage that his chief defect as an artist was want of taste. And yet considering his work as a whole that seems to be the truth about Oscar Wilde. He cared very much about art and said many brave and challenging things for it. He was preoccupied always with it, and as an artist himself he tried honourably to deal with an experience of life which, although it was turgid and forlorn, was real enough. Mere reality of experience, however, is not enough. Before he can create largely the artist must not only have his personal vitality of experience, but he must love that experience passionately, however dark its mood may be. In reading most of Wilde's poetry, all his plays but one, and his critical studies, one feels, while all the time admiring a very rare executive gift, that here is a man who for the most part instead of standing bravely by his experience was trying to escape from it. This is not at all to suggest that he was a man lacking in common courage; few men have met disaster of fortune and temperament with so gallant a bearing. It is in a

way easy for the protagonist in one of the great tragic movements of nature to meet fate fearlessly. But there is little enough of exaltation for the man who is destroyed not by passion but a merely trivial wasting of his own character. But while Wilde did not lack courage of that kind, he was deficient in that other courage which makes the artist loyal to himself at whatever cost. If the artist cannot approach universal beauty surely through the channels of his own emotional life, he is certain to fall into cynicism or sentimentality or both, and this is what Wilde did in most of his work. He was sensitive enough to the profound normal beauty of life, free play of character, charity, understanding, and the mystery of sacrifice. But he saw it all afar off, pathetically, as something which he cared for devotedly but could not himself quite be out of the resources of his own nature. And so passion is replaced by mere wistfulness, and the tragic realization at which he aimed is continually sentimentalized. And at moments when the artist's awareness of this defect in himself left him with nothing but a forlorn sense that the beauty of which he knew so well was never quite truly his own, cynicism became his inevitable refuge. It is fair to say that this with Wilde did not happen often. As in the conduct of his own unhappy life so in his art he

did strive with courage towards what he knew to be the better reason. But the final issue remains that his work taken as a whole in its brilliance and pathos misses the profounder qualities of humour and passion, and it must be remembered that this was not by deliberate intention.

Once, however, Wilde's own nature, with all its limitations, worked clearly in delight of itself and achieved what is in its own province a perfect work of art. *The Importance of being Earnest* is not really a comedy of manners in the sense of being primarily a criticism of the follies into which a society is betrayed by its conventions, and a tearing off of the masks. Nor is it primarily a comedy of wit, sure and sustained as the wit is. Attempts have been made to derive the play in some measure from the Restoration masters, but without much conviction, and while the manner employed by Wilde has clearly influenced some later writers, notably St John Hankin, *The Importance of being Earnest* really forms a class in English drama by itself. It is in mere simplicity that one says that it seems to be the only one of Wilde's works that really has its roots in passion. Every device of gaiety and even seeming nonsense is employed to keep the passion far back out of sight, and if it were otherwise the play would not be the masterpiece it is. But the passion

is there. That is to say that the play is directly an expression of that part of Wilde's own experience which was least uncontaminated and in which he could take most delight. And this meant that all his great gifts as a craftsman were for once employed in work, where with insincerity almost as the theme, there was more sincerity than in anything else he did. Plays like *Salome* and *A Florentine Tragedy* are at best little more than virtuosity, while *A Woman of no Importance*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *An Ideal Husband*, although they may have many of the qualities that mark Wilde's one great achievement, are on the whole frank surrenders to a fashion of the theatre which Wilde had too good a brain not to despise. But in *The Importance of being Earnest* there is neither virtuosity nor concession. It is a superb and original piece of construction with several moments of stage mastery which can hardly be excelled in comedy, and packed throughout with a perfect understanding of dramatic speech. One has only to recall any scene in the play and place it beside almost any of the successful comedies that one sees in the ordinary run of theatre production to see how definitely apart that greatness is set which comes of having not three words in seven dramatically right but seven in seven. But when art comes to this

excellence of form it can only mean excellence of life at the springs, and flowing through *The Importance of being Earnest* is the surest and clearest part of Wilde's life. There was much, perhaps everything, in the more profoundly moving story of man that Wilde saw always imperfectly or not at all. But he did see, with a subtlety that can hardly be matched in our dramatic literature, that the common intrigues of daily life are not really the moralist's province at all, but interesting only for the sheer amusement that can be got out of them. Shakespeare gave to the English stage a comedy as full of poetic passion as great tragic art, Ben Jonson the comedy of humours, and Congreve and his fellows the true comedy of manners, but Wilde in his one masterpiece brought into the same company of excellence the comedy of pure fun.

Stopford Brooke[1]

Stopford Brooke died in 1916 at the age of eighty-four. His remarkable faculties were alert, serenely untouched by age, to the end ; less than a week before his death he wrote a letter to Mr Rothenstein, summarizing a philosophy of life, giving brave encouragement to the painter in his work, rejoicing in the white frost that for three weeks had etched his Surrey landscape, and speaking with critical distinction of the poetry of Thomas Hardy—" one of the few men who cut into the quick of humanity." In spite of a good deal of ill-health, few men have spent as many days as he of vigorous life, or touched experience so widely or so robustly. In the sense of being responsive to every manifestation of the earth and humanity, it would be difficult to find anywhere a richer nature than that recorded in this book. Mr Jacks has done his work with almost flawless tact. It is, perhaps, to be wished that a biographer who knew Brooke so intimately and with such sympathy had given his own impressions a little wider scope ; but, since it has clearly been his wish to allow his subject to speak for himself with as little commentary as possible, it would be ungracious to complain of a method that can point

[1] *The Life and Letters of Stopford Brooke.* By Lawrence Pearsall Jacks. Two vols. John Murray, 1917.

to the highest examples. The material for the writing of a life so long and active as Brooke's must have been very voluminous; it is here selected and arranged with a skill and discretion that leave before us a personality complete in every feature.

The first reflection that comes to the mind of the reader, on reaching the end of these two substantial volumes, is that it is not a little strange that a career which, in spite of its many remarkable aspects, was not quite of the rarest distinction in its relation to its own time, and finally left little in the way of durable and tangible addition to the sum of human achievement, should justify so exhaustive an analysis. For that this biography is justified, not only for its own shapely composition, but by the quality of its subject, there can be no doubt. It may be interesting to enquire why this is so, since by usual standards it might be in question. It is possible for a poor subject to inspire a brilliant biography, but Mr Jacks in his grave simplicity of manner makes no claim to brilliance; also it is possible for a poorly executed record to acquire some permanent interest through the importance of its subject, but in this case there is never for a moment the feeling that the writer is supporting rather than being directed by his theme. As a biography the book is, in the generous use of the

word, adequate; it scores no points outside Brooke's personality, it never falls below that personality's demands. And yet, while the book does this, we are left with a strange feeling of difficulty when we seek exactly to define the qualities in Brooke that called for this elaborate treatment.

In his Irish blood Stopford Brooke carried a strain of English, Scottish, and Welsh descent. Childhood spent in a devoted family, with enough substance to make for the liberal decencies but without the excess that saps independent effort, was followed by a life that in its external movement was one of almost unbroken success. At twenty-five he was freely accepted if not already courted by intellectual and fashionable London, and working at the same time with tireless energy as a parish priest in a slum neighbourhood. Already the Broad Church party considered him to be a suitable person to entrust with the writing of F. W. Robertson's Life, a task that they looked upon as of critical importance to their position in the ecclesiastical controversies of the time. He had all the natural gifts that make at once for popularity and respect. A splendid appearance—"My word! you *are* a strapper!" said a poor woman of his congregation on his arrival in London—a fine voice, a ready

turn of speech, a very courteous wit, a love of gallant manners and a fearless regard for the truth springing from a passionate realization of the dignity of life, made him one of the most notable and welcome figures in the more thoughtful social world of his long day. A pleasant instance of the humorous good sense that gave him so just a popularity in a large circle of friends may be gathered from an entry in his diary made when he was an old man :

> Morris I first knew in 1867, forty years ago. I met him first at a dinner given by Colvin. He didn't care for parsons, and he glared at me when I said something about good manners. Leaning over the table, with his eyes set, and his fist clenched, he shouted at me, " I am a boor, and a son of a boor." As he meant to be rude I was excessively polished. " I couldn't have believed it," I said. Afterwards he was always harmonious. There never lived a truer man.

Finding that his inclination as a clergyman lay rather towards preaching than towards parish-work, he was directly able to gratify his instinct. He rapidly became famous as a preacher. His congregation, including many distinguished men and women, quickened to his own intellectual and spiritual vigour. For the rest of his life the announcement that he was to be in the pulpit was enough to pack any church in the country to the doors ; and his later preaching

tours were almost like the triumphal progresses of a successful and popular Cabinet Minister. "Your house is one where I am always happy," wrote Burne-Jones to him, "and where I never know a dull moment"; and among his closer acquaintances were many writers and artists, in whose company he was always most at home. He had the means charmingly to indulge his generosity as a host, and to fill the house to which his friends were so often bidden with the treasures of art and craftsmanship that it delighted him to possess. His family life preserved for all its members both affectionate intimacy and individual freedom with rare balance; and his days were singularly free of the accidental troubles that fall to so many men to double the inevitable burden of natural griefs.

In his chosen calling any preferment seemed open to him, unless it should be closed by the liberal doctrinal views that finally led to a denial of dogma and caused his secession from the Church of England at the age of forty-eight. This secession was the only incalculable event of his life that had in it the elements of suffering; and even here he was spared the more distressing consequences of his action. To come to a spiritual decision must be in itself, in spite even of the most tormenting period of doubt that may

precede it, an exhilarating thing. But it is often accompanied by the very real pain of broken personal friendships. In Brooke's case the step was taken at last with no misgiving; and, although his parents and brothers and sisters disapproved of his decision—in his father's case, desperately so—there was no loosening of family ties, while from many of his most cherished friends he met with nothing but approval for what they looked upon as an act of self-deliverance.

His secession was a brave thing spiritually, and by it he sacrificed a good deal of orthodox credit and profit. He was Queen's Chaplain, and, had he served expediency, might have attained high place. But it was not an act of lonely defiance, not a going-out into the wilderness. In the Church history of the time it was a fine individual gesture, and a by no means insignificant if not widely-followed example. Nevertheless, it was no landmark in the progress of religious thought, since it meant no more than that Brooke, whose nature was really unfitted from the first for the formal subscriptions of any church, threw aside the shackles of dogmatic control a little later in life than might have been expected, and moved, without any radical change, into the free spiritual state which had always been his true vocation. The incident, in fact, though

it necessarily assumes an important place in Brooke's biography, and although it created something of a sensation at the time, is of accidental significance only in his career. In all essential respects Brooke was the same spiritual entity after his secession as he had been before; and the man of eighty had grown without a moment of convulsive change from the man of twenty-five.

Here, then, was a career extraordinarily harmonious in its development—complete, prosperous, and happy. And yet there is, up to this point of our contact with it, nothing to set it above many that adorn each generation without making good their claim to commemoration on anything like the scale of these volumes. Nor are we much nearer a solution of the problem even when we consider Brooke's pioneer quality, when we remember that such a thought as that social evil and misery "are not the judgments of God on the sins of the sufferers, who are undeserving of such chastisement; they are due to the neglect, ignorance, selfishness, and injustice of man," though familiar enough now, needed a prophet's voice to enforce it in 1850, and that his blow for a more humane and intelligible form of religion came with the greater force from being struck, in Mr Jacks' words, at "a time of great religious

excitement not only among the clergy, but among the public at large." Nor, again, does so courageous a venture as the delivery of a course of lectures on the poets as sermons from the pulpit, which must have seriously astonished a congregation of 1870, mean more than the introduction of an intellectual quality, not necessarily rare in itself, into a place where it was not at all expected. All these things are evidence of fine gifts finely used, but, if we did not go beyond these, the rarer touch of distinction would escape us.

It will be noticed that nothing has yet been said of Brooke's work as poet and critic; and it may be suggested that in that work his real eminence is to be found. It was, as we shall see, very far from being unimportant; indeed, in some respects, it was of rare accomplishment. But Brooke himself always looked upon it as something not making the chief claim on his faculties; and these are terms upon which no writer, however richly endowed, can achieve work of the highest rank. The best writers, it is true, have sometimes been compelled by circumstance to devote precious energy to work other than their writing, but it has always been with resentment and the desire for escape to undivided service of their art. But Brooke looked upon writing as an incident in a life that was

for the most part otherwise concerned. When he turned to it, he brought to the task all the fertility with which he lived, and he perceived literature in the same generous and tender and genial way that he perceived life. His verse is graceful and fervent, expressive of an abundant humanity and delight in the world, but it lacks the touch of imaginative concentration that transforms these into the durable stuff of poetry. He himself, with his deep intellectual integrity, was aware of this.

> "If I were not to get rid of my thoughts and excitements sometimes on paper and to one who will sympathize with them," he says, "I should be overwhelmed with them. I used to practise them (*sic*), but I have given up poetry. I did not write well enough to please myself, nor anyone else, so I concluded one phase of my life."

And again,

> I don't think I am capable of writing any book on the drama of human life, save what I say in sermons. I have no invention.

In his critical studies of poetry, of which more will be said, he went far beyond this in achievement ; but even in these his aim is not so much to explore profound and universally significant principles of the poet's mind and art, as to discover for himself, through the most delightful of channels, some further expres-

sion of his vivid appreciation of the world in which he lived. Of his book on Browning he writes : " You only . . . have recognized how much there is of myself in the book ; and its interest to me is there, and less in that which I have said about Browning." It may be true, in a sense, that all good criticism reveals the writer as much as it does his subject, but there is a special meaning in the claim that Brooke makes for his own work. It indicates a governing temper, the consideration of which should bring us near to the solution of our problem.

It is not as a representative poet or man of letters that Brooke has engaged, and justly engaged, the attention of his biographer on this large scale. Nor is it as a representative churchman or preacher or leader of religious thought. It was of these activities that his daily work was made up, it is true ; and yet, while they contribute to the impression that we receive from Mr Jacks' volumes, they by no means dominate it. Nor is it, finally, wholly a question of character. The robust, affectionate, wise, and often sparkling personality that comes before us is, indeed, striking and finely worthy of homage. Of such are the salt of the earth, and we are grateful to Mr Jacks for enabling us to share in no small measure a companion-

ship that must have been so precious and delightful to Brooke's family and friends. But these admirable characteristics are not in any very rare way remarkable, and in themselves do not account for the deeper interest that we find the book successfully holding throughout its considerable length. It is, rather, that there was always in Brooke a really first-rate power of intuition that in itself may be said to have amounted to genius, though it was but fitful in its exercise. This power never wholly came into its own.

There were in the habitual operation of Brooke's temperament two principal qualities—his uncompromising common sense, and his instant responsiveness to everything and everybody with whom he came into contact, or, to use the word he himself would have chosen, his love. To a first analysis these two qualities can seem to be nothing but "well and fair," and yet the whole truth is by no means so easily set down. Common sense, the gift of being able in nine cases out of ten to answer yes or no to a question, and swiftly to disentangle sophistry from truth in dealing with the problems of daily affairs, is a valuable part of character; and few if any of even the most visionary of great minds have been wholly without it on occasion. But there is always the chance, the

danger perhaps, that it will breed a habit of saying yes or no when in truth neither is possible, and of confusing sophistry with honest subtlety. With no man is this more likely to happen than one whose mind, endowed with great natural force and activity, moves freely in the bustle of the world's business. Such a one is at once invested with an authority which he will almost certainly find himself often forced to maintain at the sacrifice of careful and exact deliberation. There are times when his very responsibility makes impossible that loneliness to which the mind must always be able to move if it is to achieve memorable judgment. And in the same way the unquestioning response of a man's spirit to every demand that the world makes upon it, nobly generous in intention as it is, may end by impairing in some measure his realization of himself. The one thing that is often lacking in what passes for common sense is sense ; and it is not the least of love's mysteries that until a man truly and proudly loves himself he cannot love the world.

The profounder side of Brooke's nature, the genius in him, was never in doubt about these things. Against the evidence of so long and fruitful a life it may seem temerity to question Mr Jacks' conclusion that Brooke's career was rightly chosen and directed ;

but it is of real psychological interest to explain, if it may be done, how it came about that a man with so much of the finest quality in him left so little of the finest achievement for the quickening of posterity. And we seem to divine, as we read the record of his life, that the genius that was always in the background prompting him to a rarer imaginative mood, was in lifelong conflict with a hardy instinct for a rough and ready intellectual state, where rapid decisions had to be made and immediate answers given in the busy atmosphere of affairs. This is not to say that the poet (and Brooke was potentially a poet of rare divination) should be remote from affairs; it is merely to say that he cannot complete himself if he is intellectually bound to affairs by circumstance.

This instinct of Brooke's was a circumstance beyond control as much as any other; and in that respect Mr Jacks is right in saying that it is useless to discuss it. But the phenomenon before us is not a common one. Brooke's intuitive power, of which examples will be given, was of a very rare order, and throughout his life it was never wholly quiescent. For its complete realization it needed a condition of intellectual quietness and deliberation that was impossible to a popular preacher and worldly counsellor patiently accessible to every enquirer who came along.

Brooke often refers to this need of his imagination in his letters and diaries ; and, with the faculty itself as powerful as it was, there was the strongest probability that it would assert itself to the point of gaining his undivided allegiance. But it did not do so ; and the more obvious and workaday though amiable quality in his mind that so successfully disputed precedence with the rarer strain must clearly have been of altogether unusual force. We have, therefore, the curious spectacle of a man who, seeking devotedly to serve the whole world, nourished one side of his nature at the expense of another side that was, in truth, potentially his finest instrument for the very service that he so earnestly sought to do.

Of Stopford Brooke's chivalrous generosity and his indulgence of every trespasser upon his attention, I had a small but very treasurable experience. When I was floundering without any kind of guidance in the difficulties of commencing author, I sent to him, in the way of bewildered novices, a small book of the greenest immaturity. Thereafter he met every approach with the most charming patience and geniality, writing no perfunctory notes, but long and considered letters that seemed, with perfect gravity, to say that at last he had found a congenial occupation in life. Soon I was bidden to Manchester

Square, and, climbing many flights of stairs to the study in the roof, I made my first trembling appearance before authority. The room was stacked with treasures, but my whole attention was absorbed at once by this man of heroic stature and bearing, who smoked cheroots in unbroken succession and made me feel in ten minutes that he considered my visit to be a very important occasion indeed. Tennyson, it appeared, had sat in that chair, Browning too, I believe; many good poets had begun by writing badly, and a failure was much excused if it was "well tried"; beyond that there was one poem that he liked, and nothing was said of the twenty that nobody could possibly like. Everything that is good in nature flourishes under such a touch. His letters, when he was about eighty, to a junior clerk with a perplexed turn for literature, have the note of youth addressing youth. The homage that was so eagerly paid and so charmingly taken was never by the smallest hint claimed as a right. It is difficult to quote from letters that are so unwarrantably kind, lest admiration for their generosity should be mistaken for belief in their justice, but a phrase or two may be given without danger of this. "*I* like it, but then I am of the 19th century, and do not mind being delayed and quietly brought to the point." How salutary that is in its implica-

tion, but how gentle and considerate. Then this, of an editorial introduction that I had written, "You rate him as a poet somewhat higher than I should feel inclined to rate him—but how natural that is to an editor! and it does good rather than harm to have it done." These are words slight in occasion, but they are characteristic. Here was a very precious fragrance of spirit; and, in leaving us conscious of that above everything, Mr Jacks has fulfilled his subtlest obligation.

It was just this extraordinary and all-pervading instinct of sympathy—and that not only emotional but intellectual, the far rarer sort—which perpetually distracted him, so long as he lived in the great world, and hindered, as I have said, the free exercise of other powers. To cavil, even with the deepest reverence, at so fine an achievement as Brooke's life was in itself, may seem a poor thing to do; and yet the plain truth is that, in coming to it, he left unfulfilled what might have been a yet greater service. He preached and counselled and inspired and consoled well, bestowing radiance and fragrance upon all with whom he came in contact. This was good, but it is not the whole story; and, if it had been, while there would have been splendid justification of his life, there would have been but little for so ample a record of it.

For many people may and do achieve these things nobly in every generation, but to very few is given that intuitive power of which we have spoken, a power making for the most inspiriting revelation in all its exercise. It must be repeated that in Brooke this power was of no minor, but of an extremely rare quality. There are men who come, with credit and even distinction, to the consummation of a gift that is essentially not of the highest kind; but Brooke's latent gift was of altogether finer stuff. "She dwelt in the doing of right *and made it*," he said of his mother; and the saying asserts itself as the word of genius. Here is a picture, taken from his diary, conceived beyond any necessity of the moment, to the maker of which very little, short of the greatest creative felicity, was impossible:

> John Pounds was an interesting creature—a man who, lamed for life, took up shoe-mending in a little shop, open to the air in a bye-street of Portsmouth. He made a shoe for his lame foot, and then he thought he would make his living by mending for the poor. And then, being full of affection for children, he took a wild little boy, and while he worked taught him to read and spell. He soon had a class of twenty or thirty in his shop, and fed them with potatoes cooked in his little stove, and in this way, during his life, he taught hundreds for love. He was the real founder of the Ragged School movement. Blessley bought the shop, and kept it as it was. I visited it with great interest and pleasure.

The Unitarians are very proud of him. His tomb is in the churchyard of their chapel. "May I die," he said, "as a bird dies" (he kept a number of them and a cat and rabbits) "when he drops off his perch." And so he did. He fainted one day in the Town Hall, and died on the spot. He never took money. All he did was for Love's sake; and he always worked while he taught. He seems to me the nearest of all I have known to the heart of the Kingdom of God.

The judicious will see at once what a faculty was here to be cultivated. And this, again, in the middle of a sympathetic reference to Kingsley:

K. screams often when he ought to speak. All his books scream. If he tells you it is five o'clock, it seems as if it were the last hour of the world. . . .

And this of Charlotte Brontë:

The vulgarity is not in Charlotte herself, but in the fact that she is drawing characters in a society which, as she had no experience of it, she is forced to invent out of her prejudices. . . .

And, finally, of Mr Shaw's *Man and Superman*:

Ann's character is the best thing in it, and is admirably done. I know those soft cats, who purr you out of existence.

It is useless to argue that these things are no more than the captivating but slight *dicta* of a man of affairs who could at his leisure turn a happy phrase. What-

ever they may be in substance, in their evidence of a very rare kind of faculty they are anything but slight. They spring from a source that, had it been allowed to run freely, could not but have risen to a stream of no common depth and force. We cannot read such things as these without reflecting, a little jealously, that Brooke devoted to the improvement of a congregation what was meant to enlighten mankind. When we turn from these strangely personal intuitive flashes to his observations made in response to the daily pressure of society and his followers our regret is emphasized. Already when he is twenty-five he writes as mentor to a sister, and, instructing her about the art of painting, says, " It is a grand office, that of the artist, to be the orator of Nature, the exponent in form of the loveliness of colour "—than which anything shallower and more inept could not well be conceived.

This too ready surrender of himself to the transcendentalism of service, to the idea, slightly enervating to the imagination, of a continual outpouring of pervasive love, led him, moreover, at times into the most sentimental indulgence of the pathetic fallacy ; for example :

The little river ran swiftly among its boulders, and the

thin grove of trees hung over it, dropping now and then a leaf loosened by the wind into it, just like a message of kindness.

And,

The wind is the free Bohemian of the Universe, who goes over all the earth, and from north and south, east and west, from tropic to pole and from pole to tropic, it brings to the trees all the news of all the continents and isles of ocean, and of all the life of men and beasts.

Or it could bring him to an intellectual confusion that is hardly credible in a mind capable of such insight as is shown in the passages that have been quoted :

I love the talk of a stream more than any poetry, and the mists on a mountain shoulder more than any picture, and the sound of the wind in the forest more than a sonata of Beethoven, and the building of a mountain like Snowdon more than any cathedral in the world.

We can hardly believe our eyes as we read, so far does the drawing of such comparisons fall short of the very alphabet of æsthetic perception. Brooke himself, it goes without saying, when the genius in him was in authority, was as alive as any one to the defective imagination implied in this manner of thinking. He could then play with such ideas graciously enough, but that was a very different thing from being mastered by them as he was at those other times. " I like to sleep with the sound of the ocean

in my ears, and to think that the waters whose gentle noise I listen to have come across 3000 miles to visit me with their affection. Their affection is given to them by me, but why not ? " And let us add one other word in illustration of the profound and simple understanding that he had when his genius and not the hungry world controlled him : " Tennyson says nothing to you. He speaks to me, not as a prophet, or a consoler, or a thinker. He speaks to me because he was a poet."

It is for the recurrent glimpses that it gives us of the quality that lay behind so right an utterance as that and so vivid a conception as the one of old John Pounds in his shop that Mr Jacks' book is chiefly suggestive and inspiriting. But it has a further value. That the quality was never brought to full fruition is a fact which we may lament, but its conflict with the forthright and vigorous instinct for direct ministration by which it was subdued is strikingly implicit in Mr Jacks' presentation, and it has its own special significance.

One of the results of this condition that so largely governed Brooke's nature is that his old age impresses the observer, with the whole record before him, as the period of his life when he most deeply realized himself. We do not see it as a period of quietness and

retrospection closing a long and crowded career, but rather as one of escape from the ties of circumstance and the more tyrannous side of himself into the full and delighted possession of the richer and rarer strain of his personality. He gave up Bedford Chapel when he was sixty-two, a few months after the publication of his *Tennyson*. He lived twenty-two years longer, and during that time wrote and published a book on Browning, two on Shakespeare's plays, and two of miscellaneous essays on poetry. In these he never quite disentangled himself from the duality of disposition that it has been the chief purpose of this study to analyse; but his life, from the time that he cut himself clear from the formal obligations of his ministry, attained a singular lucidity and completeness. Those chapters of Mr Jacks' book that deal with this period present a figure of remarkable spiritual and intellectual beauty. The diaries and letters of these later years are pervaded by a sense of delighted liberation, none the less profound because Brooke himself probably was not externally aware of it. In passing out of the sphere in which he had laboured so nobly to realize his ideal of service, he found for the first time the condition in which his highest and subtlest instinct, the instinct for mere nobility of being, could come to perfect flowering. Mr Jacks calls the period

a renewal of youth ; but there is, truly, nothing in Brooke's youth or middle life comparable with the serene greatness of his old age. When the last analysis is made, that old age is, perhaps, the clearest symbol of his supreme achievement, his most durable and excellent claim to remembrance and celebration.

I used to see a great deal of the world, a host of folk, but I got tired, and other things that I went through isolated me, and now I find the social roads very dusty and wearying. I always desire the wild moors, and solitude is my meat and drink. There is a pompous, high-pitched sentence for you. Only, I am never morose, and life amuses me.

" It is well-fitted to impel and kindle youth." So wrote Brooke of Emerson's *Essays* ; and the remark was made in admiring homage. No commendation can be more fitly made of Brooke's own critical work. It is praise that might easily be misunderstood in view of the kind of thing that is not uncommonly supposed to be suitable for this purpose, but, rightly considered, it implies no easy distinction. The young mind, in its first delighted and uncertain consciousness of the life of poetry, could have no better fortune than to come under the influence of Brooke's essays. It would suffer there nothing of the indignity that is nearly always done by age to youth in the name of instruction ; it would find an unblemished eagerness

to match its own, it would come continually upon profound yet simple generalizations to help it in the exercise of its judgment, and it would profit incalculably by having before it a rare example of humility. This last quality lies very sweetly at the roots of all Brooke's critical thought. It is "so beautiful a poem," he writes of *Maud*,

> that the small regrets of criticism are as nothing in comparison with the large delights its poetry gives. Moreover, the criticisms may be all wrong. When we approach a great poet's work, our proper position is humility.

And, again,

> It is not by saying that one poet is better than another that we shall win a good delight for ourselves. It is by loving each of them for his proper work, and by our gratitude to them all.

It is not necessary to attempt any detailed survey of what is a very considerable body of work, work that has, within its easily definable limitations, a durable distinction. Throughout the essays are scattered passages that could have been achieved by none but a critical mind of a very high order, a mind half directed by genius, as we have seen. Here are two examples taken indifferently from among scores. He asks what kind of poems will be written (by a poet

whose instincts are sound in the matter) at a time of national crisis.

> They will not be directly written on the special national excitements. The poet is kindled by these excitements, but he does not write on them. The stirring in his heart which he receives from the nation he applies to his own subjects, those which are personal to him.

And this is what he says of Meredith :

> It is easy to be obscure, but there is a certain difficulty in being as obscure as Meredith was ; and he liked that difficulty, and kept it with him, as a king keeps a jester.

His style, too, often touches a most felicitous precision. " Their manner," he says of Milton's prose works, " is always victorious ; an audacity and a defiant life fill their controversy." The limitations that keep his critical work as a whole from the first rank which, by the evidence of its finest moments, it might have taken, are imposed by that same defect of concentrative power that has already been examined. Just as in life he responded, too readily for serene spiritual self-realization, to the multifarious claims of the world, so he was often so eager to explore every mood in the poet he was studying and to pour out his sympathy upon every turn in his poet's deliberation, that he left the hard way of close and exact analysis of the particular in relation to general principles and

strayed into the diffuseness of unprofitable paraphrase. Both in his character and in his writing he suffered, it would seem, more than any man of his measure whose life has been recorded, from the defects of his qualities. But the qualities were of the very finest texture, and, had they been as little disturbed by conflicting elements as by every chance of nature they ought to have been, he would not only have been the memorable and distinguished figure that he is, he would have been one of the greatest men of his age.

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